

THE ARGONAUTS OF THE AMAZON.



BY
C.R. KENYON.



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THE ARGONAUTS OF THE AMAZON.

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To: Jack,

Wishing him many happy
returns of the day

From his chum:

Alce
→



‘Now, Heaven help us!’ cried Mac, swinging his club aloft.

The Argonauts *Of the Amazon*

BY

C. R. KENYON

AUTHOR OF 'THE YOUNG RANCHMEN'

WITH SIX ILLUSTRATIONS

BY

ARTHUR RACKHAM

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THE ARGONAUTS OF THE AMAZON.

CHAPTER I.

HATCHING AN ENTERPRISE.

‘HY not strike out a fresh line for ourselves, and try to discover one of those vast hoards of wealth which tradition, if not history, tells us lie hidden in various quarters of the globe?’

My companions half-turned in their easy-chairs at this startling proposal, staring at me as though uncertain whether I spoke in jest or earnest.

We were three old school chums who had met, after a lapse of twelve or fourteen years, at the centenary celebration of a large public school. Now, at the close of the festivities, we were enjoying a cosy smoke and chat before separating for the night—or perhaps for ever, for would not the morrow see the hundreds who had assembled dispersed once more to all parts of the kingdom!

The more we talked, however, the less we three were inclined to separate. From reminiscences of our old school-days we passed on to the exchange of subsequent experiences; and the discovery that none of us so far had made much of a success in life—at all events from a monetary point of view—tended powerfully to revive the old comradeship.

It seemed, indeed, as if some destiny had brought about our meeting for a special purpose; for the longer we conversed and the more we discussed matters, the stranger it appeared that we should have turned up from different parts of the world to be present at this celebration.

To begin with myself, Phil Berkley, I had not been fortunate in choosing farming and emigration as a means of livelihood, my only gains consisting of experience and such-like unnegotiable assets.

Dick Stavely had done little better in the overcrowded profession and practice of medicine, though he had contrived to extract a good deal of pleasure out of life by indulging his bent for all manner of field-sports—in which, like the rest of us, he always excelled.

Last, but not least, M'Cormick, or Mac, as he was more familiarly called, having failed by a few marks to obtain the wished-for commission in the army, had enlisted as a private soldier. In this capacity he had seen considerable service in India, Egypt, and Africa. Subsequently, also, he had served with the famous North-West Mounted Police. A good many hard knocks, a few medals, and the rank of sergeant were the net results of these stirring experiences.

It was after each of us had recounted his adven-

tures, and made his little confessions of failure, that the idea of joining together in some new enterprise suggested itself. We then discussed the pros and cons of the various colonies, and the chances offered by the different gold or diamond fields, without being able to come to any satisfactory decision; the chances of striking it rich, as the miners say, appearing far too unpromising where almost every acre of ground has already been prospected. After debating the matter for nearly an hour, something I had lately been reading occurred to my mind, and led to the quixotic suggestion already mentioned.

‘Treasure-hunting’s a little out of date—don’t you think?’ observed M’Cormick, smiling indulgently, as he rose to relight his pipe at one of the gas-jets.

The attitude displayed his fine figure to advantage, and for the moment arrested my attention. Standing fully six feet three inches in his stockings, and of proportionate build throughout, the ex-soldier looked a veritable son of Anak. Yet with all his magnificent physique he carried scarcely an ounce of superfluous flesh, so hard and fit was he. Tall and athletic as a lad, he had developed into a really splendid man.

‘Besides, who ever heard of its being successful?’ struck in Dick Stavely.

‘I have,’ said I promptly.

‘Name an instance, please.’

‘Dr Schliemann’s discovery of the treasure of Agamemnon.’

‘By Jove, yes! I’d forgotten that.’

‘And so had I,’ said Mac; ‘and yet, what a sensation it made at the time! You’ve scored over us this time, old fellow.’

I smiled in acknowledgment of the compliment, and continued: 'If tradition proved right in such an extreme case as this, why should not it do so in others which are far less mythical?'

'Why not, indeed?' acquiesced Dick, his sanguine nature quickly disposing him to look favourably upon any new scheme. 'Why, bless me!' he added, 'Schliemann's discovery related to treasures described by Homer nearly three thousand years ago!'

'To be sure they did,' I responded; 'whereas the treasure I'm thinking of was secreted scarcely three hundred and fifty years since, and was described not only by writers of the period, but by others subsequently, even down to our own times.'

'What treasure are you referring to, old chap?' inquired Mac carelessly. Evidently he wasn't much impressed.

'The balance of the Inca's ransom,' I replied. 'Some hundreds of millions of pounds!'

'Hundreds of millions of pounds!' repeated Stavely, in tones of wondering bewilderment.

'Phew! That surely must be an exaggeration!' cried M'Cormick, beginning to wake up, nevertheless.

'Not unless all the contemporary accounts of Pizarro's conquest of Peru are utterly unreliable,' I said, 'including the conqueror's official reports to his sovereign, Charles V.'

'Well, but if all this wealth really exists, how is it that one hears so little about it?' objected Mac, not liking to appear over-credulous.

'Probably because all the early attempts to recover it having utterly failed, the world in general became incredulous and indifferent about it. Latterly, how-

ever, fresh interest has been aroused in the subject by the researches of students and travellers; and it is not long ago that the President of the Royal Geographical Society himself made special allusion to this very treasure.'

'Umph! that sounds encouraging,' said Mac.

'Certainly,' acquiesced Dick. 'It's inspiring to find that even eminent men don't consider the story improbable.'

'Quite the contrary,' I said; 'there's practically no doubt as to the existence of the treasure. The only difficulty is as to its whereabouts. It's perfectly marvellous how the Indians have kept the secret.'

'Tell us all about it, old fellow!' exclaimed Dick.

'By all means,' urged Mac, throwing himself back in his easy-chair, and looking as much interested as any one.

'I'll give you the main facts as nearly as I can remember them,' I said, 'but you must not forget it is some time since I read the various accounts which have been published on this subject.'

'All right; go ahead!' cried the impatient Stavely.

'Well, you know, it was early in the sixteenth century that Pizarro, fired by the exploits of Cortes in Mexico, led an expedition to conquer Peru.'

'I know very little about it, old chap, but I'll take your word for it,' interrupted Dick, in his facetious, light-hearted way.

'Order!' cried Mac. 'You're just as frivolous as ever, I see.'

'Beg pardon,' said Dick. 'But cut the historical prelude as short as possible, please; I'm dying to know about the treasure.'

I laughed, for it was impossible to be angry with a man like Stavely, who always appeared to be brimming over with life and joviality.

‘All right,’ I said; ‘I’ll be as brief as possible.’

‘You take your own time about it, Phil, and then we sha’n’t lose anything,’ said M’Cormick.

‘It was not until the third attempt,’ I resumed, with a nod to Mac, ‘that Pizarro at last succeeded in subjugating Peru, and then only by the most reprehensible means. Professing the most peaceful intentions, he invited the Inca to a banquet at his quarters in Cajamarca. This the unsuspecting Atahualpa was foolish enough to accept, with the result that he was taken prisoner and thousands of his unarmed followers put to the sword.’

‘What a dastardly act!’ exclaimed M’Cormick indignantly.

‘Fiendish!’ cried Stavely.

‘It has been fitly described as “unparalleled and unpardonable perfidy,”’ I said, ‘and will for ever blast the conqueror’s fame.’

‘He deserved a like fate himself,’ said Mac savagely.

‘And he suffered it, too,’ I responded, ‘for rather less than ten years later he was surprised and murdered in his house by some of his own countrymen.’

‘A just retribution on the wretch!’ exclaimed Dick; adding a moment later, ‘But let’s get to the treasure.’

‘Well, the unfortunate Inca offered to fill the apartment in which he was confined with gold as high as Pizarro could reach if the latter would set him free. The offer was accepted, but the leader’s comrades would not wait until the room was full. Their

cupidity got the better of them, and they clamoured to be led against the terrified Peruvians, whom the horrors of the Cajamarca massacre had thoroughly cowed. Transformed into demons more than ever by the greed of gold and lust of conquest, the adventurers first murdered their defenceless prisoner, and then pushed on to the capital.'

'What! murdered the poor Inca after having accepted his offer of a ransom!' exclaimed M'Cormick, half-rising from his chair, as though he would like to have had a few of the murderers to vent his wrath upon.

'The brutes!' said Stavely.

'It is some slight satisfaction to know that they rather overreached themselves by their mad covetousness and cruelty,' I said.

'By Jove, I'm glad of it!' ejaculated Dick. 'How did it happen?'

'Why, an enormous quantity of bullion was at that very time being transported from Cuzco to complete the emperor's ransom. It was the contribution levied upon the temple there, and consisted of a hundred thousand packages of purest gold, carried on the backs of as many llamas.'

'Ah, now we're coming to the point, or rather the treasure!' cried Dick. 'But go ahead; I'm interrupting.'

'Tidings of the Inca's death,' I continued, 'reached the priests who were in charge of the convoy while it was slowly making its way over the mountains. Instantly they ordered the drivers to leave the road, and pushing on into the rugged fastnesses of the Andes, buried or concealed their gold, and returned.'

‘Bravo! Well done!’ cried the excitable Dick. ‘I wonder if we shall find it.’

‘It’s sure to have been found already, and spent too by this time, I should think,’ said M’Cormick despondently.

‘Impossible,’ I declared, ‘for such a sum as that could not have been put into circulation in South America without creating a sensation. And if the finder had succeeded in getting out of the country with it, he would not have been slow to let the world know of his good fortune.’

M’Cormick made no reply to this, but smoked away as if in deep thought. Dick, on the contrary, plied me with numerous questions, and was particularly desirous of knowing how the Spaniards took their loss when they heard of it.

‘They were in a terrible rage,’ I said, ‘and mercilessly tortured every one who could be identified with the expedition, in the hopes of making them divulge the hiding-place. But not one would peach even to save his life.’

‘By Jove, they were a plucky lot!’ exclaimed Dick. ‘I wonder the Spaniards were able to obtain so easy a mastery over such a race as that!’

‘Yes, the conquest of Peru is one of the most extraordinary events in history,’ I said; ‘and there are many circumstances connected with it that are far more incredible than this story of the Inca’s ransom.’

‘But, granted the treasure referred to really exists, what chance is there of our discovering what the Spaniards, and doubtless many other adventurers since, have searched for in vain?’ objected M’Cormick.

‘Well, only this,’ I replied—‘that in all this lapse

of time it is scarcely likely that some inkling of a secret which must be known to thousands of Indians should not have leaked out. In fact, recent travellers go so far as to affirm that the caravan left the highway at a place now called Azanjaro, between Cajamarca and Cuzco. The name is said to be a corruption of the Indian words *Asuan caro*, signifying "more distant," and is supposed to refer to the orders of the priests to get away from the road.'

'Ah, that sounds more hopeful,' said Mac. 'At all events it supplies a clue of some sort to work upon.'

'I vote we go to Peru and follow it up,' cried Stavely. 'It's a marvellous country, from all accounts; and if we don't find the buried treasure, we may easily drop upon something almost as valuable in the shape of a gold or silver mine.'

'And if we fail in both respects,' said I, 'there is yet a third course open to us—an enterprise which, if not likely to be very lucrative, still is one that possesses peculiar fascinations for adventurous Britons.'

'What is that, old fellow?' cried my companions, almost in a breath, as I paused a moment to relight my pipe.

'Why, a favourite dream of mine,' I replied—'to explore that magnificent tract of country lying beyond the Andes and drained by a network of streams and rivers flowing northward into the mighty Amazon.'

'By Jove! I never heard of it,' said Dick.

'Nor I,' acquiesced Mac. 'What is it called?'

'The portion lying within the boundaries of Peru is called the Montaña,' I replied; 'but the remainder,

though nominally a part of the vast and unwieldy empire of Brazil, is practically a *terra incognita*.'

'One always associates Brazil with great heat and impenetrable forests,' said M'Cormick.

'And correctly so as regards the northern parts and the valleys of the Amazon and its principal tributaries,' I answered, 'though in the elevated tablelands of the interior and the higher reaches of those wonderful rivers it is different. There the climate is said to be delightful, and immense plains afford excellent pasturage to innumerable herds of wild animals.'

'Bravo! that will suit me nicely,' exclaimed Stavely, true to his sporting instincts.

'And me too,' echoed Mac. 'But there is one question I should like to ask,' he added, 'and that is, why such a splendid tract of country is still for the most part unsettled and even unexplored.'

'Ah, there's the rub,' I answered. 'Neither the Peruvians nor Brazilians are remarkable for enterprise, and the fierceness of the savage tribes inhabiting the banks of some of those remote tributaries of the Amazon has hitherto deterred exploration and settlement.'

'That's enough, old man!' cried M'Cormick, with sudden energy. 'How soon do you think we could start?'

As I had anticipated, all that was required to rouse the soldier's interest and co-operation was the prospect of a brush with the Indians.

CHAPTER II.

NEEDFUL PRELIMINARIES.



HE became so excited over the project I had put forward that we continued to discuss it and the best way of carrying it out until far into the night. At length it was arranged that we should all three set to work to gather every particle of information we could about the country we thought of exploiting. I was also commissioned to proceed to Liverpool and find out what would be the cost of our passage to Callao, and the best line of steamers for the voyage, &c. In a fortnight's time we were to meet together again at Stavely's house and report progress.

Having thus settled a few of the preliminaries of our quixotic enterprise, we tardily sought the repose of sleep, or rather bed, for I, at all events, did not sleep more than an hour or two, being far too much excited by the events of the day and the discussion of the evening.

The two weeks slipped by as weeks only can when one is fully occupied in some congenial pursuit. On the very day appointed for the rendezvous I received

a telegram from the steamship company which necessitated my going again to Liverpool, and I only just managed to catch the last train from there to Chester. This was nearly ten miles from Stavely's house, but I contrived to reach my destination by means of a hansom-cab a few minutes before midnight.

I had scarcely time to ring the door-bell ere Dick himself rushed out, exclaiming:

'Come in, old fellow! Where on earth have you been? We had almost given you up;' and seizing my portmanteau, he would hardly wait until I could pay the cabman before bustling me into the house.

'You've kept your engagement, and that's all!' cried Mac, glancing at the hall clock, as he seized my hand in his vice-like grip.

'When you've heard my explanation,' I said, 'I'm sure you both will acquit me of intentional remissness.'

'By Jove, there's an unmistakable air of importance about you, old chap!' exclaimed Dick, in his humorous way. 'I can see you're brimming over with information.'

'Which, if he's wise, he'll take good care not to communicate until he's had some refreshment,' observed M'Cormick. 'He looks as if he needed it badly.'

'You're about right,' I responded, 'for I've had little to eat since breakfast. There was no time for anything more substantial than a sandwich and bun in Liverpool.'

'Liverpool!' exclaimed both M'Cormick and Dick in a breath. 'What in the world took you there?'

'I thought you'd completed your business with

Messrs Younger & Co. a week since,' added Stavely; and then checking himself, he apologised for his curiosity, and made haste to attend to my creature comforts.

'Now, Berkley, we're dying to hear your report,' cried M'Cormick when, half-an-hour later, Dick and I joined him in the smoking-room.

'Don't you think it would keep till morning?' I suggested. 'I've a good deal to say and to explain, and these all-night sittings'——

'Till morning!' interrupted Dick, in tones of dismay. 'Oh, my good fellow! we could never wait till then to learn what took you to Liverpool again at the very time you ought to have been journeying hither.'

'No, my word!' echoed Mac; 'you must at all events just give us your story in brief, please. Dick and I would be consumed by our own curiosity before morning if you retired without doing so.'

'In that case,' I answered, laughing, 'humanitarian considerations will oblige me to comply with your wishes;' and settling myself comfortably in the chair which Dick had pushed up to the fire for me—for it was a cold winter night—I began my report.

'In the first place,' I said, 'the results of my inquiries induce me to recommend a material alteration in our proposed route to the Andes.'

'Indeed! what is that?' asked Dick.

'Well,' I continued, 'instead of taking passage to Callao and journeying over the barren western slopes and passes of the Cordillera, I propose that we sail direct to Pará, and'——

'Pará!' interrupted Dick. 'Where on earth is that? I never heard of such a place.'

‘It’s a rising seaport at the mouth of the Amazon,’ I replied. ‘It is spelt P-a-r-á, but the accent is on the last syllable, as in Peru, so it is pronounced Pa-rá.’

‘Thanks, old fellow; we’ve been calling it Pārer,’ responded Dick, laughing.

‘Yes,’ acquiesced M’Cormick, removing his pipe from his mouth and shaking out the ashes; ‘we’ve been studying the atlas to help to pass the time while waiting for you, and we noticed Pará, as you call it, near the mouth of the southern outlet of the Amazon.’

‘That’s the place,’ I said. ‘Messrs Younger & Co. despatch fine steamers there at regular intervals. I saw the head of the firm, and he strongly recommended us if we want to see the upper Amazon to take this route to Peru. He said a personal friend of his, who is a great naturalist, had quite recently been exploring some of the larger tributaries of the mighty river for specimens of insect life. For this purpose he had taken out a nice little steam-launch adapted either for sea or river service—in fact, he had it specially built for the Amazon and Orinoco river-systems. Well, having completed his researches in South America, it seems he has no further use for the vessel, and he asked Messrs Younger to try and find him a customer for it. “If you take my advice,” said the managing partner, “you’ll buy this little steamer and ascend the Amazon and Marañon to Peru, instead of going all round Cape Horn to Callao, and then descending the river in a ramshackle boat—which,” he added, “is all you would be likely to obtain in Peru.”’

‘A splendid idea!’ exclaimed Stavely, who, from having been born on the coast and accustomed to

both rowing and sailing boats from boyhood, was delighted at the prospect of a launch.

‘Ay, but such craft are costly things,’ objected M’Cormick, in whom the more sober and calculating instincts of his Scotch progenitors were occasionally revealed.

‘Very costly at first hand,’ I responded, ‘especially when built to order as in this case; but, luckily for us,’ I continued, ‘a small steamer built and adapted for a specific purpose is not every one’s purchase.’

‘That’s true enough,’ admitted Mac. ‘What’s the price?’

‘Yes; what’s the price and the tonnage and the length and the beam and the draught and everything?’ inquired Stavely; adding, ‘For I believe you know all about it, Phil.’

‘I’ve got the particulars here,’ I replied, extracting the paper from my pocket-book and handing it to him, with the remark that, as he understood such matters better than I did, he had better read and explain it to us.

‘With the greatest of pleasure!’ cried Dick excitedly; and taking the half-sheet of blue ‘commercial note’ from my hand, he commenced to read: “For sale, a bargain, owner having no further use for it, a smart little ten-ton steam-launch (*Ladybird*), now lying in the port of Pará, Brazil. This unique vessel was specially built and equipped for the Amazon. She has all the latest improvements in machinery and fittings, electric light—including a powerful search-light—good cabin, forecastle, and deck-house. Her draught is four feet. For further particulars, price, &c., apply to Messrs Younger & Co., Liverpool and Pará.”’

'Sounds very nice,' said Mac; 'but we are still ignorant of the price unless Phil can enlighten us.'

'Scarcely likely he'd forget such an important particular,' responded Dick, with an inquiring glance at me.

'I have the refusal of her at two hundred pounds,' I said—'scarcely a third of her cost price.'

'Two hundred pounds!' repeated Dick. 'She's dirt-cheap, if fairly sound.'

'Ay, but how are we to ascertain that? It's a long way to Pará,' objected Mac, who generally affected the opposition rôle in our discussions.

Stavely looked nonplussed at this awkward question, and again turned to me for support. Luckily I was prepared with an answer.

'I've done the best I could to meet the difficulty,' I said, 'by cabling to the British Consul at Pará, and also getting Messrs Younger to wire their manager there to inspect and report on the state of the yacht.'

'Ah! that was a good idea,' remarked Dick, with evident relief.

'Here are the replies,' I continued, again having recourse to my pocket-book. 'This is from Messrs Younger's manager, and runs: "Pará, February 9th. Examined launch; condition A1.—SMITHERS." And this is from the consul—of course I had prepaid a reply: "Pará, February 10th. *Ladybird* well known here; unexceptionable.—JOHNSTONE, B.M. Consulate."'

'Bravo!' exclaimed Dick. 'What could be more satisfactory than that?'

'Nothing,' admitted M'Cormick, with sudden animation, 'save to be on board the little vessel and steaming up the Amazon.'

‘Hurrah for the Amazon! hurrah for Peru!’ cried Dick, springing from his chair with almost boyish abandon, and executing a sort of Highland fling on the hearth.

‘Order!’ called M’Cormick—‘order! Our exultation is somewhat premature until we have completed the purchase of the launch. How do you think that can best be managed, Berkley?’

‘I have been in communication with the owner of the vessel, who is now in London,’ I replied, ‘and have made the following arrangement with him: Firstly, we are to have the refusal of the launch at the price stated for a clear week, counting from yesterday. Secondly, if we decide to have it we are to pay him a deposit of fifty pounds down, and the balance on arriving at Pará and taking possession of the vessel. Thirdly, in the event of our being dissatisfied with the bargain after seeing and examining the launch and all its fittings, we are to be at liberty to annul the contract, and the deposit money is to be refunded to us.’

‘That sounds fair enough,’ observed Mac, ‘and I vote we clinch the matter at once. Have you had the contract indited?—I think that’s the correct term,’ he added in jocular tones.

‘Trust old Phil for that,’ interjected Dick. ‘He’ll see that everything’s in order. I wonder he wasn’t a lawyer. I’m sure it would have proved more lucrative than farming.’

‘Or even doctoring!’ I retorted, to his utter confusion, though, with his usual *bonhomie*, he joined heartily in the laugh against himself.

‘Come now, this isn’t business,’ cried Mac, who

was the first to recover his equanimity. 'What about this agreement, Phil?'

'I have the document safe in my portmanteau,' I said; 'we can sign it and despatch it to-morrow along with the deposit money. The owner in return will send a signed counterpart and receipt for the money, and the thing will be settled.'

'The only point I've misgivings about is the management of a steamer,' said M'Cormick rather seriously. 'We shall have to hire an engineer, I suppose.'

'Not at all!' cried Stavely. 'I know enough about steamers to fill the rôle myself. I once,' he continued, 'took a trip to the Mediterranean and back in a friend's steam-yacht, and he taught me every detail as to the management of the engines and machinery. In fact, after the engineer was taken ill at Malta, we took it turn about to do his work, and brought the vessel home with only the aid of a stoker and two sailor chaps.'

'Bravo!' I exclaimed. 'You've more accomplishments than I supposed. I thought your experience, though great, was entirely confined to rowing and sailing vessels.'

'So it *was* up to this Mediterranean trip,' replied Stavely, 'but since then I've rather favoured steam, especially when time is an object; one is so much more independent of the state of the weather. I've got a tiny steam-launch on the Dee at this moment,' he continued, 'and I often run down to Chester in her. She can do the ten miles in a little over an hour.' Then, doubtless observing our looks of surprise, he added hastily, 'Of course I only *hired* her.'

She belongs to Messrs Transon, the boat-builders, and they let me have her for the merest trifle until the regular boating season comes round again.'

'Ah, that's very nice,' I said.

'Yes,' acquiesced Mac; 'such experience will be some guarantee for our safety on board the *Ladybird*.'

'What do you mean, old chap?' inquired Stavely, with evident amusement.

'Well, I always look upon steam-engines as little better than infernal machines in inexperienced hands,' was Mac's answer.

'Oh, the risk has been reduced to a minimum by the latest improvements,' responded Dick; 'what with water-tube boilers and ingenious safety-valves, it is next to impossible to produce an explosion nowadays.'

'I'm sincerely glad to hear it,' said Mac, with undisguised relief. 'Now I shall be able to sleep serenely.'

'Ditto,' cried I; for, to tell the truth, I had not been without my own misgivings in the matter.

'Of course we ought to have a handy man of some sort,' continued Stavely, 'or we shall be too much tied to the launch if we have to do all the work ourselves, for one person at all events must always remain on board.'

'Perhaps the servant who is at present in charge of her would answer our purpose,' I said. 'He seems to have acted in the capacity of cook, slut, and stoker to the owner.'

'That's just the kind of man we want,' responded Dick emphatically.

'But he's only a coloured man,' I said.

'All the better for that,' observed Mac; 'he's not so

likely to give himself airs or strike for higher wages at an inconvenient moment.'

'I suppose he'll be a mulatto, or perhaps a negro pure and simple,' said Stavely.

'No; Mr Younger called him a Mestizo,' I said.

'A Mestizo! What in the world is that?' was the astonished doctor's question.

'Mestizos, I understand, are a mixed caste between Indians and negroes,' I replied. 'The races are so mixed in Brazil that it must be rather puzzling to distinguish between the different castes.'

'Well, I never heard of such a heterogeneous population as that of Brazil,' exclaimed M'Cormick, who had taken down an encyclopædia from some bookshelves near him, and was deep in the study of the question. 'Just listen to this,' he continued, commencing to read from the volume before him: "'Besides Europeans there are Native Brazilians, or white persons born in Brazil; Mulattoes; Mamalucoes, a mixed caste between whites and Indians; Caboclos, or Indians in a domesticated state; Tapuyas, Indians in a savage state; Free Negroes, born in Brazil; Emancipated Negroes; and Mestizos, a mixed caste between Indians and Negroes. These make up the free population. Then there is, or was, the slave population. This consists of Africans, Mulattoes, Mestizos, and Creole Negroes.'"

'Gracious!' exclaimed Dick. 'How exceedingly bewildering!' And then observing that I was yawning, he added, 'But there's no need to study this curious conglomeration to-night, so let us to bed.'

CHAPTER III.

PEDRO IMPARTS ALARMING INFORMATION.



It is unnecessary as it would be wearisome to chronicle all that occurred before we finally completed our arrangements for the adventure on which we had set our minds. Suffice it to say that, within three months of our meeting at Stavely's house, we found ourselves fairly launched on the broad waters of the Amazon.

The launch—which, by the way, we renamed the *Argo*—proved to be a most satisfactory purchase. She more than realised our anticipations in every respect, and by the advice of Messrs Younger's manager, who had some experience of the upper Amazon, we still further perfected her for our purpose. This was by having a guard-screen fitted to the bulwarks. It was made of finely tempered steel-sheeting, and so constructed that it could be raised or lowered instantaneously by simply moving a lever. When fully extended this novel shield made a screen six feet six inches high all round the steamer's deck. It was intended as a protection against the arrows and darts

of the savage tribes inhabiting some of the upper reaches of the river and its tributaries.

In addition to this light defensive armour, we mounted a small Maxim gun, which we had brought with us from England, on a specially designed platform at the poop. M'Cormick was very proud of this gun, of which he took special charge. He had once formed part of the complement of a Maxim detachment in South Africa, and thoroughly understood how to handle the weapon.

'If the ancient Argonauts had possessed this tiny bit of ordnance,' he said, patting the barrel affectionately with his hand, 'they could have dispensed with Medea's sorceries in their quest for the Golden Fleece.'

'And poor Jason might thus have been saved the resultant complications,' responded Dick.

'We'll hope our Medea will have no such drawbacks,' I observed; 'and if ever we have occasion to use her, that it will only be against such monsters as alligators and boa-constrictors.'

'The latter at all events will worthily represent the dragon which guarded the Golden Fleece,' said Dick; 'for, if travellers are to be believed, the python, or boa, attains a terrific size in some of the marshy plains of the interior.'

'Forty-eight feet, for instance,' said I; 'but I should think that might safely be divided by two to redeem it from fiction into fact.'

Meanwhile we were steaming gently up the Pará, or southern branch of the Amazon, from which the port takes its name. The Amazon is a truly magnificent river. It is upwards of four thousand miles long, including its windings. It is navigable for three

thousand three hundred miles, and for two thousand three hundred there is depth of water enough for the largest vessels, and a breadth of three-quarters of a mile. It receives the waters of some two hundred tributaries, of which one hundred are navigable, and seventeen of this number are themselves from one thousand to two thousand three hundred miles in length. At Tabatinga, where it enters Brazilian territory from Peru, it is a mile and a half in breadth. Below its junction with the huge Madeira it is three miles wide, and expands to as much as seven miles where there are islands. Its mouth is about two hundred miles in width, and is divided into two large and several smaller arms by islands, one of which, Marajo, is one hundred and eighty miles long and one hundred and twenty-five broad. In fact, everything about the Amazon is on a large scale, including a curious phenomenon, which we were presently to experience, called the *pororoca*.

The last thing Mr Smithers called out to us, as he stood on the wharf watching us start, was, 'Look out for the *pororoca*! Pedro will tell you about it.'

Pedro was, of course, the coloured man who had been in charge of the launch, and whom we had succeeded in engaging. He was at that moment below, driving the engine.

'The *pororoca*!' exclaimed Dick, who was steering. 'What in the name of Fortune is that?'

'I think it's the local name for the "bore," or wave, which rushes up the river during spring-tides,' I replied.

'Oh, is that all?' responded Dick. 'The same sort of thing occurs on the Dee in a small way, but

is only dangerous to the lightest kind of boats. It would have to be a very extraordinary tidal wave indeed to incommode such a vessel as this.'

'Nature seems to work on a gigantic scale, though, in these latitudes,' observed Mac; 'and if the bore chances to be in any degree proportionate to the size of the river, its destructive capabilities must be enormous.'

'On the contrary, I should say it ought to diminish with the breadth of the river,' asserted Dick, in his confident manner. 'A channel like this, fifteen or twenty miles wide, allows sufficient room for expansion instead of confining and concentrating the force of the water.'

This argument sounded plausible enough; and though we did not feel convinced, neither Mac nor I thought it worth while to continue the discussion. We simply resolved to take an early opportunity of questioning Pedro on the subject, and meanwhile to keep our eyes open. As, however, the day wore on, and all appeared serene and lovely in the warm, balmy air, we gradually ceased to think of anything but the beauty and novelty of our surroundings as we floated onward.

We kept pretty close to the right bank, so as to be well out of the track of the large trading-steamers passing up and down the river between Pará and Manáos (or Barra do Rio Negro), which is a place of some importance about a thousand miles up-stream.

There was a good breeze blowing from the east, but as it was at our backs we scarcely felt it when in motion. Towards noon the sun, which had been shining only intermittently during the morning (for it

was the fag-end of the rainy season in eastern Brazil), came out bright and hot. We had not yet rigged up our double canvas awning, and the heat became so unsupportable that we decided to put into a little bay formed by a rocky headland projecting into the river. Here we landed, and took refuge from the fierce rays of the sun in a beautiful grove of palms which grew almost to the water's edge.

'Phew! but it's a scorcher, this tropical sun!' exclaimed Dick, throwing himself down under the palms. 'I never experienced anything like it before.'

'It is hot, and no mistake,' I assented, seating myself on a fallen tree; 'in fact, rather more so than I bargained for at this season.'

'Oh, it's warm, of course,' struck in Mac, 'but it will make us appreciate this pleasant shade all the more;' and lighting his pipe, he lolled against the fallen trunk beside me and affected to be enjoying the situation immensely. Nevertheless, I noticed that he had taken the precaution of stuffing some wild fig-leaves into the crown of his hat as a protection against sun-stroke.

'Just look at that creature Pedro!' exclaimed Dick; 'if he isn't struggling up the bank with a huge hamper of refreshments—we won't call it lunch, for it is too hot to eat much.'

'I hope he's left the launch quite safe,' said I. 'It would be awkward if she commenced a voyage on her own account.'

'No fear of that, old man. I shut off the steam myself, and drew most of the engine fire, while Pedro was letting go the anchor.'

A few minutes later we were busily engaged mixing

and drinking fruit-syrups and soda-water and eating biscuits.

'Can you tell us anything about the *pororoca*?' I inquired of Pedro as soon as a suitable opportunity presented itself.

The Mestizo turned towards me with a scarcely perceptible start.

'De *pororoca*!' he repeated, opening his eyes very wide and showing an inordinate amount of whites, whilst a peculiar grin overspread his broad features. 'Yas, sah, I'm tell very much lot about de *pororoca*.'

'Mr Smithers called after us to beware of it,' I said, 'and we should like to know all about it.'

'Yas, sah; ob course, sah. De *pororoca* am bery awful when it come, but it no come much often, 'cept in de spring, jest 'fore de new an' full moons.'

'Why, there's a new moon in about three days,' interjected Stavely, with some little apprehension; 'I was looking in my almanac last night.'

'Ay, but you can't call this spring,' I objected; 'so, unless the *pororoca* is a phenomenon of very irregular habits, I don't see much cause for anxiety.'

'True, old man! We won't let it disturb our heavenly repose unnecessarily,' struck in Mac, shaking the ash out of his pipe, and drawing the broad brim of his Panamá hat over his eyes preparatory to indulging in a siesta.

'Well, go on, Pedro,' said I, 'and tell us what is best to be done if we should unfortunately chance to be caught by the "bore."'

The nigger raised his hands and eyes in a deprecatory way, displaying the whites of the latter more than before, and exclaimed, 'Caught, sah! Nuffin,

sah! Dere is not no time for nuffin, 'cept "Good-bye, ebery one!"'

'Surely,' I said, 'it is not quite so bad as that. There must be some way of guarding against serious disaster, or why did Mr Smithers tell us to "look out" for the *pororoca*?''

'Ah, Massa Smidders bery nice gentleman,' replied Pedro; 'he no like any one not go straight to hebben when de time come.'

'Gracious! what is the fellow talking about?' exclaimed Dick. 'It's absurd to suppose the "bore" could endanger a steamer, however tiny, if a decent lookout is kept, so as not to be caught broadside on or astern.'

'What height does the wave reach, Pedro?' I asked.

'Oh, more'n two times as high as de big massa,' he replied, pointing at M'Cormick's huge figure before him.

'Phew! that would be over twelve feet!' cried Stavely incredulously.

M'Cormick raised the brim of his hat sufficiently to glance beneath it at the Mestizo, and said very quietly, 'Come, draw it mild, my good fellow.'

Pedro evidently did not relish these insinuations, to judge by the look he gave my comrades. His appearance was not prepossessing, at the best of times, but when angry or excited his eyes rolled and his huge teeth seemed to project from his capacious mouth in a truly diabolical fashion. When we got to know him better we found that, though an excellent servant and usually good-tempered even to a fault, he was an ugly customer when put out; and nothing annoyed him more than to distrust him or doubt his veracity. This was not unnatural, for he had inherited to the full

the Indian virtue of truthfulness. His bodily aspect, though it denoted prodigious strength, was scarcely more attractive than his facial. Short, thickset, very wide across the hips and between the shoulders, and with a neck like a bull, he was decidedly a man to be avoided in a *mêlée*. Time proved him to be as brave and devoted as he was strong and ugly.

‘You not b’lieve Pedro!’ he cried. ‘White mans bery cleber, but white mans not know eberyting. What for you tink dis riber call de Amazon?’

‘Because of the nation of armed women which early explorers are said to have found somewhere along its banks,’ I said confidently—for had not I been taught this as a boy at school!

Pedro grinned from ear to ear.

‘Ah, dat de ole story,’ he cried, ‘but it all foolishness—it all big lie!’

‘Indeed!’ I exclaimed. ‘Then pray tell me what is the true derivation of the word Amazon.’

‘De demiuation am bery clear, sah. Dis part ob de riber always call Amassona by de Injin folks. “What de meaning ob dat?” you say. Why, boat-swamper, ob course. Once you see de *pororoca* coming you no s’prise dey call de riber Amassona.’

‘Then if ever I see it coming I hope it will be from a safe place on shore,’ I responded, much impressed by Pedro’s earnestness.

‘Ditto,’ said Mac, who, being, like myself, more at home on land than afloat, had little confidence in boats, big or little.

Stavely, on the contrary, was a born sailor, and had the greatest faith in his abilities in that line.

‘I only hope I shall be on board the *Argo* when next

the *pororoca* comes along,' he said. 'I'll never believe that, with steam up and a sharp lookout, there wouldn't be time to reach a place of safety ere the wave could overtake us, even if it is big enough under any circumstances to swamp a vessel the size of ours.'

'Wid steam up and a sharp lookout, perhaps we jest git time to sing one verse ob dat bootiful hymn de 'Merican missionary teach us 'fore we all swallowed up,' said Pedro, beginning to sing:

'We shall meet beyond de riber,
Where de surges cease to roll;
Wid its——

Gosh! what was dat?' was the incongruous finish to the darky's hymn, as a heavy roll of distant thunder startled not only ourselves, but the monkeys and parrots in the trees above us.

The sky had all at once become overcast, and a few large drops of rain, the precursors of one of those sudden and often terrific storms peculiar to the tropics, were already falling as we sprang to our feet.

'That's the worst of the Amazon,' exclaimed Dick; 'it's subject to these unruly freaks of nature. We'd better get on board the launch immediately in case of a squall. Hark!' he continued, 'the wind is already rising.'

'I don't think it's going to be much this time,' said Mac, taking a calm survey of the heavens; 'otherwise,' he added, 'I should feel inclined to remain on land as being the safer element of the two.'

Without noticing this remark, Dick hurried down to the bank, where Pedro was already bundling our things into the boat. Mac and I followed with less

alacrity on account of our misgivings as to the wisdom of quitting *terra firma*. But the rain beginning to come down in good earnest as we clambered on board, we were not sorry to take shelter in the saloon, while Dick and Pedro replenished the engine fire and endeavoured to get up steam. Although Mac evidently had little faith in his own forecast, it proved a correct one, and after a few more crashes of thunder and vivid flashes of lightning the storm gradually subsided.

By the time steam was up we were able to leave the sheltering bay and continue our course. Rain still fell, but in a sort of fine drizzle instead of its previous deluge, and the wind remained strong from the same quarter. Clad in inimitable gabardine, we could ignore the rain, and the wind being at our backs only helped us along the faster.

We were congratulating ourselves on having escaped the threatened hurricane, and Pedro had just popped his head and shoulders above deck to get a breath of fresh air after the dust and heat of stoking, when once more a heavy, booming sound came rolling over the water, as it were. But this time it was more like the roar of distant cannon than the 'red artillery of heaven.'

'Hark! was that thunder again?' I exclaimed.

'Thunder? Ay, the thunder of cannon!' cried M'Cormick, rushing to the launch's stern and gazing down the river, whence the sound appeared to come. He was like an old war-horse that scents the battle from afar.

'Hist, massas!' ejaculated the black, at the same moment, in tones expressive of the greatest awe and apprehension. 'Hist! Dat bery like de signal-gun!'

‘What do you mean—what signal-gun?’ I asked, in surprise.

But the Mestizo scarcely heeded me. He was holding up the forefinger of his right hand and listening intently, while his eyes seemed almost starting out of his head with the intensity of his gaze down-stream. Stavely, in the shelter of the wheel-house and the concentration of his lookout ahead, seemed unaware of the cause of our excitement.

‘What on earth are you all about?’ he cried. ‘One might think you had never heard thunder before.’

‘Tunder! Dat no tunder. Hark!’ responded Pedro, as a second distinct but distant boom caught our ears. ‘My golly!’ he continued. ‘Here him come! De *pororoca*! de *pororoca*! Him just passed Pará. Dat de warning gun. Now look out, ebery one!’

There was no mistaking the black’s earnestness, and for a moment even our confident skipper, as we had dubbed Stavely, seemed to catch something of his subordinate’s panic.

‘What’s the best to be done?’ he cried anxiously.

‘Put the vessel about, sah,’ replied Pedro, ‘and meet de wave stem on. Den p’r’aps we drive bang through to de surface, instead of straight down to de bottom. No use try to run away from de *pororoca*!’

And with this unsatisfactory dictum he disappeared below to attend to the machinery. At the same moment Mac’s voice was heard shouting to us:

‘Look out! I think I see the “bore” approaching. Yes, my word!’ he continued; ‘here it comes with a vengeance!’ And springing back, he closed the hatch to prevent the water from rushing below and swamp-ing us.

CHAPTER IV.

THE 'POROROCA.'



SPRINGING to the wheel to assist Dick, I glanced anxiously down the river. The sight which met my eyes fairly made me shudder. A solid wall of water was advancing upon us with the speed of a hurricane. It needed no special training to comprehend that if it caught us broadside on it would be good-bye to the *Argo* and all her company.

'Hold her over! That's it! Hard a-starboard!' cried Dick, as we gripped the wheel and struggled hard to bring the steamer quickly round.

The high wind was much against us, but the *Argo* answered to her helm splendidly. She turned within a marvellously small space. We had accomplished our object. We breathed again. But the danger was only lessened, not averted.

'Ho there, below!' shouted Stavely, hailing the Mestizo. 'Go ahead, quick! Full speed ahead, I say!'

'Hold tight!' called out Mac, at this moment throwing himself flat on deck and seizing an iron stanchion-ring with both hands. 'Hold on for your lives!'

We did hold on, Dick and I; we clutched the wheel with all our might.

'Keep her straight!' was Dick's hoarse cry, as we plunged full speed into the bank of water.

The next instant there was a tremendous shock. Our little vessel quivered from stem to stern, and a deluge of water broke over us. We were completely submerged. For one horrible moment it seemed as though we were actually foundering, but in the next we rose buoyant to the surface.

'Thank Heaven, we're out of that!' exclaimed Mac fervently, scrambling to his feet, all dripping with water.

But the words were scarcely uttered when, to our dismay, we saw another huge wave, even higher than the first, bearing down upon us.

'Hi! Look out!' we shouted; and Mac flung himself down as before, again clutching the stanchion.

'Hold her straight!' was all that Dick could add ere we again were almost swamped by the terrific deluge.

This time we were under water even longer than before; and when at last we emerged, all three of us were quite exhausted and all but breathless with the struggle. But what was even more serious was that the *Argo* was so far worsted by her second encounter that she was left broadside on to the stream and almost stationary.

'A repetition of this and we go to the bottom!' gasped Dick, looking anxiously down the river.

'Couldn't we make for the little bay where we lunched?' I suggested. 'See, there is the sheltering headland! We might reach it before'——

'Ho there, Pedro!' sang out Dick, without waiting

for me to finish. 'Turn on every pound of steam—forge ahead, quick !'

The steamer's prow was already pointing towards the bay, and in another second or two we were cleaving the intervening stretch of water with ever-increasing speed. Pedro had turned on full steam, and as we were no longer facing the wind and tide we made rapid progress. Leaving Dick at the helm and Mac at the weather bow keeping a sharp lookout with a good glass, I rushed down to the engine-room to see if I could be of any assistance to Pedro. I found the good fellow hard at work shovelling more coal into the furnace. His complexion was several degrees darker than usual by reason of a thick layer of mingled perspiration and coal-dust, but it was not that which disconcerted me. He was singing to himself; and the first words which caught my ear as I entered were:

'Yes, we'll meet beyond de riber—
De bootiful, de bootiful riber !'

I took it as a bad omen, after what he had said before about this hymn in connection with the *pororoca*, and quickly retired. I had scarcely regained the deck when M'Cormick uttered an exclamation of surprise and terror, and shouting out that it was 'all up with us,' began rapidly to divest himself of his long mackintosh and heavy boots.

'What in the world are you doing? What's the matter?' I cried, rushing towards him, for I thought he had suddenly taken leave of his senses.

'Look!' he exclaimed, handing me the binoculars and pointing down-stream.

I took the glasses and hastily surveyed the broad

stretch of water. The atmosphere was thick with driving rain, but through it all I saw what at first sight looked like an immense embankment thrown across the river. I knew well, though, what it really was—a *third and apparently enlarged edition of the 'pororoca.'*

Returning the glasses, I gave one glance towards the headland. We were sensibly nearing it. Could we reach its friendly shelter in time to escape destruction? That was the vital question! If we could *not*, the only alternative would be to charge the wave as before. But we had barely survived the last encounter, and almost anything seemed better than another resort to that desperate expedient.

Calling to Dick to look out for the approaching wave, I hurried back to the engine-room. My idea was to endeavour to get a little more speed out of the engine, even if it could only be done by risking an explosion. I reckoned that the 'bore' would reach us in about two minutes, as the powerful glasses had shown it to be about three miles away, and that it would take about the same length of time, at the speed we were making, to gain the little bay. The race, therefore, was likely to be a very close one, and a trifle more steam-pressure, and consequently increased revolutions of the propeller, might make all the difference between our escape or destruction.

As I expected, owing to the energy with which Pedro had been shovelling in our best fuel, the boiler fire was a miniature furnace, and the surplus steam was rushing from the safety-valve. A glance at the pressure-gauge showed that the Mestizo had already rather overstepped the extreme safety limit. But

desperate emergencies call for desperate expedients, and without a moment's hesitation, I clapped extra weight on to the valve.

The effect was instantaneous in more ways than one. Pedro ceased singing, and exclaiming, 'Oh sah, now we go up instead ob down!' fell upon his knees in a supplicating attitude; while the launch, answering to the increased pressure, seemed almost to bound along.

'Bravo!' exclaimed Dick as I regained the deck. 'We're moving now, and no mistake.'

'Ay, but I hope the boiler won't burst,' said Mac, who, *sans* coat and boots, had joined Stavely at the wheel, 'or we shall move higher than we bargained for!'

There was something so exhilarating in the pace we were going that, intensely critical though our situation was, we could not refrain from a grim joke or two. Before, however, I could make any reply, the long, low ridge of advancing water caught my eye. My comrades perceived it simultaneously, and the sight sobered us on the instant.

'My word! here it comes,' cried Stavely. 'What shall we do?'

'Keep straight on,' I replied; 'we're almost under the lee of the headland.'

'I doubt'—— began Dick; and then, appalled by the rapidly nearing wave, he stopped short, and stood staring at it and clutching the wheel as if spell-bound.'

It was a terrible moment. This third wave was even more awful than the others. A wall of dark water, fully fifteen feet in perpendicular height, was sweeping up the river with irresistible force. Our only hope—and it was a slight one—was that we

should reach the sheltering promontory in time to avoid being engulfed.

'Heavens, it's upon us!' I cried, casting a despairing glance at the impending deluge, which seemed on the very point of overwhelming us.

'No; we shall just do it,' was M'Cormick's calm response, as at that instant we passed under the lee of the rocky headland into a haven of safety.

But it was a marvellously close 'shave,' as Dick called it; for, as we shot into the little bay and under cover of the projecting cliff, the 'bore' swept past our stern. So near was it that it caught the dingy, which was towing behind, and brushed it out of sight in an instant, the rope snapping like thread. No wonder each of us gave a sigh of relief and ejaculated 'Thank Heaven!' at our narrow escape from destruction; but there was no time for more at the moment, for the bay was very small, and it was a question whether we could stop the *Argo* in time to avoid running into the bank. The imminency of this second danger roused Dick from his stupor.

'Ho there, below!' he shouted out, with sudden urgency. 'Shut off steam—stop her, I say!' and then a moment or two later he added, 'Reverse the engine—full speed astern!'

Luckily Pedro proved equal to the occasion. Notwithstanding his belief that we were as good as doomed, he kept his head sufficiently to obey orders promptly and correctly. I had again rushed down to the engine-room, but there was nothing for me to do but to remove the temporary weight from the safety-valve. It was just as I had left it, and had served its purpose well.

Dick's prompt commands and skilful handling of

the rudder—ably seconded as he was by Mac—averted the threatened danger. And though the water of the tiny bay rose and fell abruptly with the passing of the 'bore,' our gallant little vessel never failed to answer to her helm. If she had, or if there had been any defect in her machinery—and especially if her boiler had not proved thoroughly sound and reliable—well, our expedition would have come to a sudden and extremely tragic end! As it was, however, we just succeeded in escaping the *pororoca* without running into the rocky shore at the extremity of the little bay.

No sooner had we come to a standstill than Pedro appeared on deck. He stared wildly about him for a moment or two, and then exclaimed with great fervour:

'Tank Heben, we out ob dat tribulation!'

His serio-comic appearance, combined with the relief I felt at finding myself safe, put me into a facetious mood, and I responded:

'Yes, your hymn was most appropriate, Pedro; we do indeed meet beyond the river, where the surges cease to roll!'

M'Cormick evidently did not approve of such levity, as he considered it, but Dick laughed. However, the black soon turned the tables on me by observing:

'Ah, Massa Berkley! God is bery merciful. Him know dat you no fit to cross de hebenly riber, so Him leabe you little longer on de earthly.'

'Ah! ah! that's one for you, old man!' roared Dick; while Mac indulged in an appreciative smile at my expense.

'Anyhow, we're not much the worse for your terrible *pororoca*,' I rejoined hastily.

It was indeed an unfortunate remark. The Mestizo had turned and was looking over the stern of the launch, and as if in reply to my stupid retort, he exclaimed :

‘Golly, massas! Where am de boat?’

‘The boat!’ cried Dick and Mac, almost simultaneously, as they sprang to the rail. ‘Why’——

They stopped short as, for the first time, they saw that the dingy had disappeared. Then they turned to me with looks of blank amazement. I bit my lip with vexation as I remembered the dingy’s fate, and that I alone had witnessed it, Dick and Mac at the time having all their attention taken up with steering clear of the rocks ahead. My comrades might well look disconcerted, for the loss of the dingy was a serious matter; it meant, in fact, the necessity of our returning to Pará for a substitute, unless we took our chance of replacing the little craft at Manáos.

While waiting in our haven to see if there would be yet another wave—for sometimes as many as four follow one another—we consulted together as to what we should do. Dick had something of the sailor’s superstition as well as skill, and he declared it was unlucky to go back after once having started on an expedition. We ascertained, too, from Pedro that almost anything could be obtained at Manáos, or Barra do Rio Negro, as he called it, so we decided to continue our voyage. It was a fortunate decision, as it turned out, for we had the luck to recover our boat about a mile higher up the river. It had been carried by the ‘bore’ high up the bank, and left bottom upwards in the tangled roots of some huge trees growing above.

CHAPTER V.

TRUTHS STRANGER THAN FICTION.



THE day after our adventure with the *pororoca* we found ourselves emerging upon a vast, lake-like expanse of water studded with islands large and small. This was the river proper, the mighty Amazon. We had left its southern outlet—the only less mighty Pará—behind.

‘My word! this is a marvellous river,’ exclaimed Dick; ‘we are already nearly out of sight of the right bank, and where the left is goodness only knows!’

‘Probably fifty odd miles away to the northward,’ I said. ‘Smithers told us to turn due west after clearing the Pará.’

‘Ay, to be sure he did,’ responded Dick, hastening to alter the launch’s course accordingly; and then a minute later he added, ‘I was so taken up with these pretty islands that I forgot to bring the steamer round.’

‘Fortunately it’s of no consequence except to slightly lengthen our journey,’ I said, ‘as we’re not pinched for room on the Amazon.’

‘No indeed,’ he rejoined; ‘we’re more likely to get lost from overmuch.’

By this time we had rounded a small island which seemed to be a mass of myrtle, and were heading a little south of west. M’Cormick was smoking his pipe under the awning, and I was leaning over the rail, idly watching the flotsam as it drifted past—for the river was in flood—when suddenly I caught sight of an immense fish as it rose to take some garbage.

‘Oh, what a monster!’ I exclaimed.

‘A shark?’ queried Mac, struggling out of his comfortable deck-chair.

‘More like the sea-serpent, I think, to judge by its length,’ said I.

‘I heard the splash myself,’ responded Mac. ‘Suppose we get a hook and line and try a little angling?’

‘By all means,’ I answered, at once acting upon the suggestion, and rushing below for my tackle.

We had brought a large supply with us, and I selected the biggest hook and the strongest line out of the lot. Then going to our little larder, I took a piece of raw pork and baited a hook with it. Thus equipped, I returned to my post at the side of the launch, and threw in the baited hook, having first wound the line on to a reel. In less than half-a-minute I felt a pull, and the line began to run off the reel at a surprising pace.

‘Fetch a piece of cord, Mac—quick!’ I cried; for I feared the line would give out before the fish exhausted itself.

My fears proved well founded, for, long before M’Cormick could return with the supplementary line, the reel was nearly jerked from my hand, and I had

to run with it to the very extremity of the deck to prevent a breakage. Luckily the fish turned on feeling itself checked, and made back towards the launch.

‘Now’s your time—make haste!’ I cried, as Mac appeared with a big coil of tough whipcord.

He soon joined it on to the end of my line by a good sailor’s knot, and now all that was required was plenty of patience and skill to play the captive until it was exhausted. Meanwhile Dick had ordered Pedro to slow down the engine and then come up to take his place at the wheel, for he was as excited as any one at my big catch.

‘Here, Mac, old fellow, just haul on the tow-rope, so that I can drop into the dingy,’ cried Dick.

And seizing a light boat-hook in lieu of a gaff, our sporting skipper quickly lowered himself into the boat, in readiness to administer the *coup de grâce* when the right moment arrived. He scarcely had seated himself on one of the thwarts when the tiny craft was nearly capsized by some huge creature rushing blindly under it and half-lifting it from the water. It was the finny monster I had hooked, and which darted first one way and then another in its efforts to get free.

‘Good gracious!’ exclaimed Dick as he caught sight of a broad, scaly back and a huge tail disappearing into the water again; for, after encountering the keel of the dingy, the bewildered creature hastened to dive more deeply into the river.

‘Golly!’ sang out Pedro in concert as, from his commanding position, he too caught a glimpse of the fish. ‘Golly, sahs, dat am a garopa!’

‘A *what?*’ I inquired.

‘A garopa, sah—de best and biggest fish in Brazil.’

This bit of information naturally made me more anxious than ever to secure the prize, and I put forth every effort to attain it. But I had my work cut out, for the garopa was as game as it was gigantic, and I was kept continually on the run from side to side and end to end of the boat. Once I fell down, and the reel was jerked out of my hand, but M’Cormick managed to seize it as it caught for an instant against the guard-rail. At length, after a most exciting struggle of nearly an hour’s duration, Stavely cleverly gaffed the fish as it rose quite exhausted within a few feet of the dingy.

‘Whoop! I’ve got it,’ he cried in triumph; ‘throw me a rope.’

It was no light matter to get the garopa on board the launch, but with Pedro’s help we at last accomplished the task. It measured exactly twelve feet in length, and was very thick and well-conditioned.

‘What a magnificent fish!’ exclaimed Mac. ‘But what shall we do with it?’ he added. ‘It won’t keep more than a day in this climate, and there’s enough meat on it to maintain half a regiment for that time.’

‘If Pedro is not mistaken as to its value for food,’ I replied, ‘I should think we either could salt it for our own use, or for sale when we reach Manáos.’

‘Oh, garopa too good for sell, sah!’ interjected the Mestizo earnestly. ‘Him no want salt, either. Him dry in de sun, bootiful, when cut so;’ and whipping out his sheath-knife, he made a demonstration with it, showing how he would slice the fish into thin strips.

‘All right, Pedro, you shall turn your skill to

account upon it with the captain's leave, for if properly preserved it will form a useful reserve of food for us when we reach the remoter portions of the river.'

'Where the Spanish explorers you told us about suffered such frightful privations, poor wretches!' exclaimed Dick.

'Yes,' I said; 'they and their leader, Gonzalo Pizarro, came very near perishing from hunger in their adventurous march to the valley of the Napo.'

'What made them set out on such a dangerous journey?' asked Mac.

'The same spirit of enterprise and adventure that had brought them from distant Spain, I suppose.'

'But what could have been their object?' persisted Mac.

'Treasure—treasure at any cost,' I replied. 'They had heard that the fabled land of Oriental spices lay in that direction, and thither they toiled over mountain and morass.'

'And did they find it?' inquired Dick.

'Yes; they found whole forests of cinnamon-trees, but at that distance from a market they were of little value. Indeed, the half-starved Spaniards would gladly have exchanged all the bark they could gather for a few sacks of flour.'

'Then why didn't they hasten back to Quito, instead of pushing on through the interminable forests to the Amazon?' asked Mac.

'Because they heard from some wandering bands of Indians that at ten days' marching distance there was a fertile and populous country abounding in gold.'

‘Ah, that magic word would have lured the old *conquistadores* through fire and water, I believe,’ observed Dick.

‘Tell us what became of them, Phil,’ said Mac, lighting a cigarette, and disposing his big self in the most comfortable position for listening.

‘Yes, do; that’s a good fellow,’ echoed Dick, signing to Pedro to remain at the wheel.

‘It won’t take me long to narrate all I know,’ I replied, laughing. ‘The credulous Spaniards pushed on in the direction the savages had indicated, amidst forests so dense that they literally had to cut their way through them. Their provisions had long ago given out, and all they had to stave off famine was dog’s flesh; for they were reduced to killing and eating the numerous sleuth-hounds which they had brought with them on the expedition. At length the weary travellers sighted a broad river. It was the Napo, one of the great tributaries of the Amazon. Down the bank of the river they pursued their toilsome march, harassed at frequent intervals by the fierce and warlike Indians. From these they continued to hear of a rich and fertile region lower down the river, but days and weeks of painful marching found them no nearer the promised land. At last, too weary and enfeebled to struggle farther through the inhospitable wilderness, Gonzalo determined to build a large sailing-boat. This was a serious undertaking with such slender resources as the Spaniards possessed; but necessity is the mother of invention, and in about two months the work was accomplished. That was the first vessel of European construction to be launched on this marvellous river-system.’

‘My word! they were plucky fellows,’ exclaimed Dick. ‘I can’t think how they managed without nails, oakum, or pitch.’

‘They are said to have found a substitute for the latter in gum extracted from the trees; their ragged garments supplied material in lieu of oakum, and horse-shoes were converted into nails.’

‘Bravo! They deserved to succeed,’ cried Mac. ‘What became of them? Pray go on!’

‘The little brig was large enough to accommodate about half of the explorers,’ I continued; ‘the weakest were put into it, and the command entrusted to a cavalier named Francisco de Orellana, in whom Gonzalo had the greatest confidence. Then the journey was resumed, the brigantine keeping alongside; but the farther they went the more desperate their condition became, on account of the impossibility of procuring proper food. At length they were reduced to the necessity of chewing the leather of their belts and such-like expedients for appeasing the terrible gnawings of hunger; while they greedily devoured toads, serpents, and other disgusting creatures to supplement what few wild animals the woods afforded.’

‘Reports of a rich country, where the Napo joined a still larger river flowing eastward, continued to mock the miserable wanderers; and as a last resort Gonzalo resolved to despatch Orellana with a number of companions in the brigantine in quest of provisions to enable the remainder to continue the march. Orellana therefore selected some fifty men, and pushing off into the swift current, was borne rapidly away. He never returned; and after weeks of weary waiting and

suspense, Gonzalo Pizarro and his starving followers resumed their hopeless journey.

‘In their enfeebled condition it took the unlucky adventurers two months to reach the confluence of the rivers. But there was no sign or trace of the brigantine or its crew, and though the country was more populous, the natives proved also to be more savage and hostile than those they had hitherto encountered, so that the poor Spaniards were worse off even than before. In their dilemma they at length espied a solitary white man wandering helplessly through the woods. He turned out to be one of Orellana’s companions, named De Vargas, a gentleman by birth, and much respected by his associates.

‘De Vargas, it appeared, had strenuously opposed Orellana’s treacherous resolve to abandon their unhappy comrades and endeavour to descend the river to the sea. Hot words passed between the two cavaliers, and in revenge for De Vargas’s plain speaking, Orellana caused him to be put ashore and left to his fate in the lonely forest, thus adding still further to his iniquitous conduct.’

‘What a brute!’ exclaimed my hearers simultaneously.

‘Yes,’ I replied; ‘his base desertion of his helpless comrades everlastingly sullies what otherwise would have been one of the most notable deeds in the history of exploration.’

‘Then did he succeed?’ asked Mac.

‘He didn’t deserve to,’ commented Dick.

‘Yes, marvellous to relate, he *did* succeed,’ I answered. ‘In spite of unknown rapids and hostile savages, who attacked him and his men whenever

they landed to try and obtain provisions, and even followed the brigantine in their war-canoes, he eventually reached the mouth of the river. Once on the sea, he made for one of the East Indian Islands, and thence in time crossed over to Spain and reported his discoveries. It was a brilliant achievement, and under other circumstances deserving of the highest praise; but no success however splendid, it has well been said, "can blazon evil deeds or consecrate a crime."

'Hear, hear! That's a grand sentiment,' exclaimed Mac; 'we must try and act up to it ourselves.'

'Kindness conquered these self-same Indians,' I continued, 'when cruelty and oppression had signally failed to reduce them to submission.'

'Indeed, how was that?' inquired Mac, with evident interest.

'Well,' I said, 'it was the Jesuits who accomplished it. With all their faults, they had learnt one thing—the power of love. They came and ministered to the poor savages, and gradually won their confidence and affections; so that in course of time the Indians became useful and civilised members of the community, and instead of fighting against the white men, they actually fought for them. Brave and hardy, they made capital soldiers; and to this day they form the backbone of the armies of Peru and Brazil.'

'Thanks, old fellow; that's very interesting, and a wonderful example of the power of love, as you say.'

Dick had risen from his seat as I finished speaking, and strolled away to the platform where the Maxim was mounted.

'Hi, there!' he called to us. 'Lend a hand here, you fellows.'

'Why? What for?' we asked, in surprise.

We were still more surprised by his answer.

'To help overboard with this gun,' he said.

Mac and I looked at one another in blank astonishment. What could he mean? We were soon enlightened.

'If we're going to act up to the new maxim we must get rid of the old one,' he said, with a merry twinkle in his eyes.

Mac and I laughed heartily at the skipper's little joke.

'But there's no need for such sweeping measures,' I protested; 'we may as well keep the old type of maxim in reserve until we have given the new one a trial.'

'Ah, ah!' laughed Dick, 'I see you still have more faith in lead than in love. Well,' he continued, resuming his seat, 'perhaps it's as well to have two strings to one's bow in these degenerate days; so go on with your narrative, old chap, and tell us how the tragedy ended.'

CHAPTER VI.

A STRANGE VOYAGER.



‘YES, please, go on,’ echoed Mac; ‘I’m longing to hear what became of Gonzalo Pizarro and the rest of the explorers.’

‘Well, as you may imagine, they well-nigh gave way to despair when they learnt from De Vargas that Orellana had really deserted them and gone off with their only means of escape—the brigantine which had taken so much time and labour to construct. They were now at least a thousand miles from Quito, whence they had set out with such high hopes more than twelve months before. No wonder their hearts failed them, in their weak and half-famished condition, at the thought of undertaking the return journey with a repetition of all its privations and dangers.’

‘No; my word! it was enough to daunt the stoutest hearts amongst them,’ exclaimed Mac.

‘What would not they have given for a passage home in the *Argo*?’ struck in Dick.

‘There was only one heart undaunted,’ I continued, unheeding Dick’s frivolity. ‘Gonzalo proved himself

in this terrible dilemma a real leader. By means of a stirring speech and a heroic demeanour he managed to endue his followers with renewed confidence in himself and in their own abilities, and to face the only resource open to them—retreat. There is no need to dwell upon the awful sufferings endured on this trying march. Suffice it to say that, after losing many of their comrades on the way from starvation and sickness, the weary survivors at length reached Quito, and were welcomed home by their countrymen. It is recorded to their credit that their first act on entering the capital was to go in a body to the church and offer up thanksgivings to the Almighty for their miraculous preservation.'

'What a queer mixture those old *conquistadores* were!' observed Mac, in his quiet way. 'They appear to have possessed the most heroic courage and fortitude in conjunction with the basest treachery and cruelty.'

'You're about right, old fellow,' said I. 'And the same characteristics still manifest themselves in a modified degree in their representatives to-day.'

'Cuba, for example,' responded Mac.

'Yes; the insurrection there brought out the worst qualities of the Spanish character. An English resident of that unhappy island described "the barbarities of the Spanish" as "awful," and the war against the insurgents as "the cruellest ever known, . . . a war of absolute extermination."'

'It was said that as many as five hundred thousand Cubans perished from starvation in consequence of the harsh measures adopted by General Weyler,' observed Mac.

'That may be an exaggeration,' I replied, 'but the true number is probably between three and four hundred thousand. Even the Spaniards themselves admitted that it might be two hundred thousand. And the worst of it was, that these poor victims were all non-combatants, and the great majority of them helpless women and children.'

'What a horrid shame!' exclaimed Dick. 'I don't wonder our gallant kinsmen of the States rose up in indignation at such horrors and kicked the oppressors out of the island.'

'The only wonder is that they bore with the Spaniards so long,' I said; 'but doubtless that was owing to a natural reluctance to adopt the extreme measure of going to war with them if it could possibly be avoided.'

'Quite right, too,' said Mac. 'I've seen enough of war to know that it is not a thing to be lightly undertaken. Ninety-nine people out of a hundred never realise what is implied in the glib term "war," or they would exhaust every peaceful effort ere resorting to that terrible arbitrament.'

There was a seriousness in M'Cormick's manner and tone of voice when making this—for him—long speech, that caused his words to carry conviction to our minds, and for a minute or two no one spoke. The silence was broken by Pedro, who was at the wheel, calling out, 'Strange craft ahead, sah!'

'Where away?' cried Stavely, springing to his feet—an action quickly followed by Mac and myself.

'Low down on de wedder bow, sah!' responded the Mestizo promptly; but it seemed to me that there was just a suspicion of mirth in his voice.

'So low that I cannot even see it,' said Stavely, peering ahead, with one hand shading his eyes.

I had taken up a glass and was adjusting the focus, when Pedro added, 'Close inshore, sah.'

'What! that thing?' cried Dick in tones of disgust. 'Why, it's only some floating timber.'

'Dere am a passenger aboard, sah, 't all events,' persisted Pedro.

I turned my glass in the direction he was gazing, and saw, sure enough, what looked like a huge serpent coiled up in the middle of the rude raft.

'Run us alongside,' cried Stavely, addressing the steersman; 'or stay,' he added a moment later, 'you'd better go below and slow down the engine while I take the helm.'

Meanwhile M'Cormick was quietly engaged in loading his biggest rifle with a couple of explosive bullets.

'For my part, I should prefer to give the timber a wide berth,' said I; 'we don't know how much of it is submerged and ready to knock a hole in our little steamer.'

'That's well thought of, old fellow. I'll not take her too close,' said Dick, 'for I've no wish to be mixed up with a boa-constrictor in a general wreck.'

A few minutes later we found ourselves almost abreast of the drifting timber, but at a distance of some thirty yards. There was no mistake about the boa. He was coiled up in the centre of the raft, with head elevated three or four feet above it, and his fierce eyes glaring at us as we approached.

'Stop the engine!' shouted Stavely to the Mestizo.

The order was obeyed, and as the half-submerged

trees and their strange occupant drifted slowly past us we had a good view of the serpent. It was a huge creature, fully twenty feet in length, and at least a foot in diameter at its thickest part. Its scales scintillated in the sunlight, and altogether we were not sorry a good stretch of water separated us.

‘Shall I fire?’ cried Mac. He had his rifle trained over the bulwark full at the creature’s head.

‘Yes; better kill it,’ replied Dick. ‘It doesn’t look very happy, anyhow, and it’s sure to perish miserably if we leave it unmolested.’

‘Unless it chances to drift ashore and make its escape,’ I said.

‘Which would be a still greater evil,’ observed Mac, ‘as it might do a lot of mischief in this thickly populated part of the country; so here goes;’ and suiting the action to the word, he fired.

His aim was true, the serpent’s head being completely shattered by the explosive bullet.

‘Bravo! A good shot!’ exclaimed Dick, as the huge folds of the monster spasmodically uncoiled and twisted in its death-throes.

‘It’ll do no harm to man or beast now,’ I said, ‘but who knows how many wretched victims it might have crushed to death if we had not seen it?’

‘I wonder where it came from,’ said Mac after a pause.

‘And how it got into the river,’ added Dick, returning at that moment from restarting the engine.

‘It may have come from the forest region hundreds of miles up-stream,’ I replied; ‘and it is a habit of these creatures to post themselves in trees overhanging the water while watching for their prey. Probably

this one was so engaged when the flood undermined its coign of vantage and swept both tree and serpent into the river. I remember reading of one which by some such means was carried out to sea from one of the large South American rivers and borne by the current to the island of St Vincent. There it landed well and hungry, but was fortunately destroyed ere it had committed any greater mischief than killing some sheep.'

'Well, if they can travel all that distance we shall never know when we are safe,' observed Dick somewhat apprehensively.

'Oh, they're said to be quite at home in the water,' I responded mischievously, 'and even to lie in wait there, just under the surface, in order to seize any unsuspecting animal that may come to the river to drink.'

'Hold on now; you're passing from fact to fiction, I believe,' cried Mac. 'I'll get my Natural History and see what that says.'

'Yes, *do*,' urged Dick. 'I should like to know the truth about these disgusting monsters, so as to know what precautions to take against them.'

'By all means,' said I; 'and it will be equally good news to me if the indictment cannot be sustained, as the lawyers say, for I dread snakes and serpents more than anything else.'

In a few minutes M'Cormick reappeared with a large volume open in his hands. He was turning over the pages as he walked towards us.

'Ah, here it is!' he exclaimed; and seating himself on the edge of the skylight, he began to read from the book:

“Pythons, Boas, &c. These are the largest and most formidable of the family Boidæ. The python is the largest of the division, and is entirely confined to the Old World. The boa-constrictor, on the other hand, is a native of Tropical America.”

‘Umph!’ exclaimed Dick; ‘I thought pythons and boas were one and the same reptile. But go on, please; I didn’t mean to interrupt you.’

“‘The size attained by the boa,’” continued Mac, “‘is often very great. One species, the Anaconda or water-serpent, is said to frequent the neighbourhood of lakes and rivers, and to prey on fish and the animals which repair to such places to drink.”’

‘Ah, that confirms my statement,’ I said. ‘Anything else?’

‘Yes; there’s rather a lively account of how these serpents set about their deadly work,’ replied Mac.

‘Then let’s have it, old fellow,’ cried Dick, with renewed interest.

“‘When a boa dashes at his prey,’” read Mac in response, “‘he usually preserves his hold of the tree by a coil or two at the tail, seizes with expanded jaws, and then throws his flexile body round and round his victim. The tightening coils soon crush limb and rib in their resistless embrace, relaxing not until every spark of life is squeezed out.”’

‘Ugh! that’s pleasant,’ exclaimed Dick, with an involuntary shudder.

‘Yes; if there’s nothing more cheerful I think you’d better shut up the book, Mac,’ said I, ‘for it’s getting near bed-time, and we shall all be having the nightmare.’

‘Or night-constrictor,’ laughed Dick facetiously.

‘My word! that’s not a bad substitute for the old name,’ said I, joining in the laugh, ‘for it so aptly describes the condition.’

M‘Cormick continued reading to himself without paying any attention to our remarks, and all at once broke out with an exclamation of mingled surprise and incredulity.

‘Well, what is it?’ I inquired.

‘Yes—out with it, old chap,’ echoed Dick.

‘Oh, it’s only a queer conclusion which the author arrives at in the last paragraph,’ responded Mac. ‘After harping on the terrible nature of the boa’s embrace, he serenely winds up with: “Death by such overwhelming action is almost instantaneous, and far less cruel than any method which can be practised by the hand of man.”’

‘How very consoling! Now we can sleep in peace,’ cried Dick ironically.

‘Or die at ease,’ suggested Mac.

‘If the naturalist is correct,’ said I, ‘we should be conferring a benefit on the human race by taking a few of the monsters back with us to act as public executioners. Then, instead of the wretched felon being relegated to the gallows or the guillotine, he would be taken to the boa’s den and simply left to the kindly offices of that deadly creature.’

Except for a hearty laugh from Stavely, my suggestion fell rather flat, M‘Cormick merely remarking that he should take care not to use an explosive bullet next time, as it ruined the skin for stuffing, and he wanted to secure a good specimen for the British Museum.

Meanwhile the sun had already set, and the waning

light warned us that it was time to look out for a safe anchorage for the night. A small island was in view, and to this we steered our little vessel. After steaming half round it we found what we wanted—a tiny bay, or rather indentation, well sheltered by tall trees. Here we made the *Argo* secure, and then Mac and Dick landed to explore the islet, while I stayed on board to assist Pedro in preparing a good supper of garopa cutlets and hot coffee.

CHAPTER VII.

AN EVENTFUL NIGHT.



WEEK after week we voyaged up the king of rivers, at one time lost in wonder at the arboreal wealth and luxuriance of the far-stretching silvas or forest regions, and at another gazing in speechless admiration upon leagues of gorgeous flowers; while these again would be succeeded by almost illimitable plains—llanos—which well-nigh stupefied us by their wearying sameness.

And so at length, after losing our way more than once, we reached Tabatinga, at the mouth of the Javary, which river forms the boundary between Brazilian and Peruvian territory. Here the Amazon is about a mile and a half wide, at a distance of two thousand miles from the ocean; and seeing that it receives the waters of some two hundred tributaries, the only wonder is that we did not oftener go astray up one or other of them. About half of these affluents are navigable, and seventeen of them almost rival in magnitude the parent-river itself, being from one thousand to two thousand three hundred miles in length. Even Pedro had never been farther than Tabatinga, so that he

knew no more than did we about the river beyond. However, by means of the maps and charts with which we had provided ourselves, we succeeded in reaching Nauta, some three hundred miles farther, without mishap. This place is on the left bank, a little below the confluence of the Ucayali on the right. Even here, 2325 miles from the sea, the Amazon is three-quarters of a mile wide.

The Ucayali is one of the head-branches of the Amazon, and rising far to the southward, traverses with its head-waters the vast district—computed at about two-thirds of Peru—lying between the Andes and Brazil. It was this immense and little-known region which we had come so far to explore. We were fully aware of the danger we should incur, for we had been told over and over again that the plains and forests were peopled by ferocious tribes of savages. But we had a theory that the bulk of Atahualpa's ransom had been hidden in a part of the mountains from which one of the tributaries of the Ucayali flowed, and we were determined to put it to the test.

After revictualling our little vessel as best we could at the small settlement of Nauta, we boldly steered southward up the broad waters of the Ucayali. For some days we passed through alternate stretches of plain and forest without encountering any other opposition than that of the current, until we reached another small settlement—the last outpost of civilisation—called Sarayacu. Here the Peruvian garrison, finding argument of no avail, would have detained us by force from proceeding on what they considered our mad enterprise—though, of course, we only told them we wished to explore the upper part of the river. They

even went so far as to train a small cannon upon us, and threatened to fire if we attempted to pass the fort. Deeming discretion the better part of valour, we hove-to until midnight, and then slipped quietly away under cover of the darkness. We had scarcely cleared the battery, however, when our move was discovered; there was a flash and a roar from one of the port-holes, and a cannon-ball ploughed up the water a few yards astern.

‘Full steam ahead!’ shouted Stavely, seeing that now speed, not silence, was required to ensure our safety.

‘Ay, ay, sah!’ responded Pedro from the engine-room.

In a few minutes we were well out of danger from the guns, though running no little risk of fouling one or other of the boats or rafts moored in the stream, or even dashing into the bank itself. Mac and I were on the lookout forward, but so dark was it that we could scarcely distinguish land from water half a length ahead. Dick had just given the order to ‘slacken speed,’ and we were beginning to feel less apprehensive, when, suddenly, I saw a dark object right in our course. It was an Indian canoe.

‘Hard a-port!’ I shouted. ‘Stop the engine!’

But there was no time to make any appreciable difference either in the course or the speed of our launch ere we dashed into the frail little craft. I had just time to see that it contained three occupants when our prow struck it and cut it in halves. At the same moment two of the Indians—for such they appeared—jumped out and swam for the shore. The third clung to a part of the wreck and was swept past. As the poor creature disappeared in the darkness, a

despairing cry in a soft, girlish voice caught my ear, and made me resolve to attempt a rescue. Seizing a life-buoy, therefore, I rushed to the stern of the launch, and seeing a dark speck upon the water, flung the buoy with all my might, but it fell short.

‘Full speed astern!’ cried Dick at this moment.

The order was promptly obeyed, and, aided by the force of the current, our vessel began to back downstream. But there was no sign of the wrecked canoe, and progression in that fashion was too risky, so Stavely reluctantly ordered the Mestizo to reverse the engine and proceed at half-speed. Just then the cry of distress came to us again through the darkness, and something in the tone of the voice stirred me strangely. Mac seemed to be similarly affected by it.

‘Come on!’ he cried, springing to the poop, as if about to plunge into the river.

‘Hold!’ I shouted. ‘There’s the dingy; let us take that;’ for luckily my eye fell upon it as I glanced over the guard-rail.

The words were scarcely spoken ere Mac seized the painter, and drawing the little boat close astern, dropped gently into her. I followed, and in less than a minute we were speeding downstream as quickly as Mac’s strong arms and the current could take us—for he had taken the sculls and left me to handle the rudder. I strained my eyes in the endeavour to penetrate the darkness and avoid running into anything. My companion seemed to have laid aside his usual caution, and pulled with reckless speed, until, beginning to fear we might have passed the object of our search, he suddenly stopped, and let his sculls feather the water.





‘Hillo! is it a mermaid you’ve captured?’ he exclaimed.

‘Hist! what is that noise?’ I said, a peculiar sound catching my ear.

‘I hear nothing but the rippling of the water against our prow,’ answered Mac.

‘But I do,’ I persisted. ‘Pull a stroke or two with your right oar, and then with both.’

He obeyed my instructions, and we turned abruptly to one side. Scarcely had we gone half-a-dozen lengths when I heard the noise again, and this time almost close to the boat. There was no mistaking it: it was the choking sort of gasp of a drowning person.

‘Ay, there she is; I see her!’ cried Mac, suddenly shipping his oars, and stretching out one of his long arms over the water as if grasping at something.

‘Take care, man, or we shall capsize!’ I exclaimed, as the frail craft lurched dangerously to that side.

‘All right; I’ve got her,’ he said, drawing some object towards the gunwale.

‘Bravo! We’ll haul her in here at the stern,’ I said.

In another minute we drew from the water what, from her apparel, we took to be an Indian girl, and laid her in the bottom of the dingy. She was more dead than alive, and scarcely moved as we rowed hastily back to the launch. It would have been a difficult matter to have found the latter had not Dick cast anchor in mid-stream, and hung a small lantern over the poop for our guidance.

‘Hillo! is it a mermaid you’ve captured?’ he exclaimed, as together we hoisted the scarcely animate figure on deck.

‘We hardly know what it is,’ I replied, ‘for it’s too dark to see. Bring a light.’

Mac was engaged in making fast the dingy's towing-rope, but Dick untied the lantern which was suspended from the guard-rail and held it over our protégée. As the light fell upon her we both uttered an exclamation of surprise. Instead of the dark, unkempt Indian girl we expected to behold, there was revealed a beautiful young woman of almost European complexion.

'My goodness! it's a white woman,' cried Stavely, greatly excited.

'A Peruvian or Spanish belle, upon my word!' struck in Mac, who had hurried up on hearing our exclamations.

But the interesting stranger's attire scarcely bore out this assertion. It was somewhat remarkable, consisting of a short, curiously woven skirt embroidered with feathers, a sort of zouave jacket of the same material, and neat little sandals of ebony wood tied to the feet by thin strips of leather studded with small silver stars; while the head was crowned by a wealth of dark, wavy hair artistically confined by a tiara sparkling with gems. But this was not all, for a beautiful torque of gold encircled her neck, and heavy bracelets and anklets of the same precious metal ornamented her wrists and ankles.

'No wonder she couldn't swim far with such a weight of metal about her!' observed Mac as we all set to work, under Stavely's directions, to restore animation.

Our efforts were quickly crowned with success. The young girl gave a deep sigh and opened her eyes. Ay, and what eyes they were!—so large and full and lustrous! Even when closed, with their long, dark

lashes resting on her cheeks, they had formed the most striking feature of the fine oval face; but opened, they turned it into a perfect dream of beauty. This was heightened by the rich colour which suffused her face on realising that our admiring gaze was fixed upon her. Half-rising from the deck with a startled cry, she glanced at us for a moment almost haughtily; then, as, doffing our caps, we bowed low before her, she suddenly seemed to remember what had happened, and to realise that we were her rescuers. Instantly her manner changed; anger and resentment vanished as quickly as they had appeared, and with queenly grace she offered her hand to us, at the same time uttering a few words of thanks in a rich, melodious voice. She spoke in Spanish, and Mac, being something of a linguist, was able to respond in the same musical language. So, leaving him to entertain our charming passenger—a task to which he seemed noways averse—Dick and I busied ourselves in preparing the *Argo's* tiny cabin for her reception, not forgetting hot coffee with condensed milk, garopa cutlets, and biscuits.

‘My word! this is becoming quite romantic,’ observed Dick as we completed our task.

‘Yes,’ I said; ‘and somewhat embarrassing also, not being prepared for lady passengers. We shall have to bivouac on deck.’

‘I wonder who she is and where she hails from,’ continued the skipper. ‘She seems half a barbarian by her dress.’

‘If she were not a white woman I should say she was the daughter of some great Indian cacique, or chief, who had been carried off by a rival tribe,’ replied

I. 'But doubtless we shall soon know all about her,' I continued, 'for she and Mac appear to be holding quite a long conversation together.'

'Ah! that's where he has the pull over us, through understanding Spanish,' exclaimed Dick jocularly, marching away to restart the launch at half-speed up-stream.

The stars were now shining out from a clear sky, and there was plenty of light for us to proceed with safety by keeping a good lookout. We were anxious to get well away from the Peruvian outpost before morning, so as to avoid fresh complications or delays. Taking it by turns, therefore, to steer and stoke, daylight found us far enough from Sarayacu.

It was not, however, until we had cast anchor in mid-stream, and assembled for an early breakfast, that Mac found an opportunity to communicate the gist of his conversation with our protégée, who, overcome by the hardships and dangers she had recently experienced, still slept soundly in her cabin. The narrative our comrade had to impart was unexpectedly startling.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE INCA'S DAUGHTER.



'CORMICK was one of those men who think and act much but say little. We were rather surprised, therefore, when he began with the formal remark that he had something very impor-

tant to communicate.

'The fact is,' he continued, with an evident effort to restrain his own excitement, 'our adventure has already assumed a startling and highly romantic phase.'

'Indeed! How so?' exclaimed Dick.

'Yes, pray explain, old fellow,' said I. 'We're dying to know what you and the fair Mamaluco were talking about so long last night.'

'What's that you call her?' responded Mac rather sharply, and with some slight accession of colour to his handsome face.

'Oh, it's Pedro's name for her, not mine,' I said, trying to repress a smile. 'He says she must belong to the mixed caste between whites and Indians, and they call such Mamalucos in Brazil; but he added that he never had seen so magnificent a specimen

before, and that doubtless she was a descendant of one of the old Inca nobles.'

'Well, he was about right there,' responded Mac, quickly mollified. 'She says her name is Unini, and that she is descended from one of the Incas—I forget his name; but she says he fought hard to rid his country of the invading Spaniards.'

'Ah! that would be the Inca Manco,' I exclaimed, greatly interested and excited.

'Yes, that was the name,' responded Mac. 'Well, it seems that, when all attempts to oust the usurpers proved unavailing, Manco and his few remaining followers retired to an almost inaccessible mountain plateau in the interior, whence this river takes its rise, and there their descendants are living to this day.'

'Very interesting, old chap,' interrupted Dick half-incredulously; 'but how does she explain her almost European complexion and her presence down here near the settlement?'

Mac shot an angry glance at the skipper. 'If you'll just have a little patience I'll tell you all I've learnt,' he retorted.

It was evident that the usually good-tempered ex-soldier was extremely sensitive in regard to what concerned the pretty Mamaluco, and Dick hastened to apologise.

'Beg pardon, old fellow,' he cried. 'No offence meant. Pray go on.'

The good-humoured way in which Stavely took the rebuke set Mac right at once, and he continued his narrative in his usually calm manner.

'It seems,' he said, 'that all sorts of dissensions

broke out amongst the *conquistadores*, as Unini calls them, culminating in civil wars. After one of the bloodiest battles, her people rescued a Spaniard of distinction from his pursuers, and escorted him in safety to their mountain fastness. As an adherent of the vanquished Almagro faction, he dared not return to Cuzco, and so determined to throw in his lot with the friendly natives. Finally he married one of the Inca maidens, and from this union the girl says she is directly descended.'

'And her appearance amply bears out the assertion,' said I.

'Yes, my word!' exclaimed Dick; 'she's fit for the proudest court in Europe.'

Mac smiled. 'So much for your first question,' he said; 'now for your second.'

'Ay, I must confess I'm more than ever puzzled as to what could bring her here.'

'It's scarcely likely that she came of her own free-will,' I struck in. 'Perhaps she was kidnapped?'

'That's exactly what happened,' responded Mac. 'A band of marauding savages suddenly pounced upon her and her attendants as she was journeying homewards after visiting the daughter of a neighbouring chief. Her small escort was cut to pieces, and she was carried off, placed in a canoe in charge of two sturdy warriors, and sent down the river to be sold as a slave.'

'A slave!' exclaimed Dick and I simultaneously.

'Yes!' was the grim response.

'Umph! Then I suppose the act lately passed for the gradual emancipation of the slaves has scarcely begun to take effect in these remote regions,' said I,

forgetting at the moment that we were now beyond the confines of Brazil, in territory which, though claimed by Peru, was practically a sort of 'no man's land.'

'Act!' repeated Mac. 'Every man's a law unto himself here, I should think.'

'It was uncommonly lucky for the girl that the canoe knocked up against our steamer,' observed the skipper.

'Yes; she says she had given up all hope of rescue, as two days had already elapsed since her capture.'

'Didn't she wonder what had brought us into these parts?' I asked.

'Ay; and that's what I am coming to,' replied Mac almost excitedly. 'She made me tell her all about our expedition, and then burst into a fit of laughter. I thought at first she was deriding our notion of the lost ransom, and my spirits fell to zero. But when at length she controlled herself sufficiently to speak, I found that it was not that which had excited her mirth—on the contrary, she admitted the fact of the concealed treasure—but it was the assumption that it could be recovered by a little party of adventurers such as ours.'

'Ha, ha! she scouted that idea, did she?' I cried, delighted, nevertheless, to find our notion of the treasure really confirmed. 'Well, never mind—so far, so good.'

'Yes, my word!' acquiesced Dick; 'and I think her sense of gratitude ought to prompt her to give us every assistance in her power to find the gold.'

'So it does,' sharply answered Mac; 'but what she doubts is our ability to carry any of it away in face

of the strenuous opposition we are certain to encounter from the fierce tribe which guards it, not to mention the inaccessible nature of the locality.'

'If the fair Imogene will only point out the hiding-place, we'll take our chance of the rest,' responded Dick confidently.

'Perhaps,' I suggested, 'it would be more than her life was worth to betray a secret which has been kept so tenaciously for centuries.'

'That depends,' said Mac very quietly; and then after a slight pause he continued: 'So far as I can make out, her father, as direct descendant of the former Incas, acknowledges allegiance to no one; and it appears certain that he and his ancestors have maintained their independence in the upland region referred to ever since the time of Pizarro.'

'Then how is it we never heard of this independent little state before?' objected Dick. 'Though, for that matter,' he added, 'I can't see how it affects the case at all.'

'My point is this,' replied Mac, 'if only you'll give me time to propound it. In return for saving the life of his daughter, the old chieftain may perhaps grant us permission to search for the treasure, even if he does not afford us any actual help.'

'Certainly; that seems reasonable enough,' I said; 'so the sooner we reach Incala the better.'

'Incala!' repeated Mac. 'What do you mean by that?'

'Well, this upland territory appears to have no name, so I've coined one for it. Incala is the short for Inca-land.'

'I believe you think it has no existence, either,'

growled Mac, in evident disgust at my ill-timed levity.

Nevertheless, the name was destined to live, for the proper Indian designation of the elevated tract was so long and unpronounceable that we were all glad of a substitute.

'There's one thing I should like to know,' I said. 'Can Unini tell us whether we can reach her country in this vessel?'

'I've asked her that,' replied Mac, 'and she says its nearest point begins just where this river ceases to be navigable except for light canoes—above the junction of a small tributary flowing into its left bank.'

'And how far does it extend—could she give you any idea of that?'

'From her description it appears to branch out like a fan from the point mentioned: south, almost to the mountains about Cuzco; east, to the borders of Brazil; and west, to the Cordillera of the Andes.'

'My goodness! then it's no bantling,' exclaimed Dick, who had been absent a few moments to restart the launch.

'No; it must be an enormous tract of country,' responded Mac, 'but it is only the higher portion, a sort of undulating tableland, which is appropriated by her own clan; the rugged slopes and dense forests which girdle it in on every side are peopled by vassal tribes of Indians, who, owing partly to their bravery and partly to the inaccessible nature of their country, have never yet been subjugated by the white men.'

'I suppose those tribes you speak of belong to some savage race which inhabits all this forest region,' observed Dick, who had taken his post at the wheel,

and was carefully steering our little craft up the centre of the broad waterway.

'No doubt they are all sprung from the same stock originally,' said Mac; 'but Unini declares that her father's vassals are as superior to the lowland savages as the Incas are to themselves. But the fiercest tribe of all, she says, is the one which the party belonged to that attacked and carried her off. They are called Guambos, and occupy a wild region on the north-west border, beyond the Unini—a river after which she was named.'

'Well, I vote we give those gentry a wide berth!' exclaimed Dick.

'Unfortunately they are the very tribe we shall have to reckon with,' answered Mac quietly; 'they occupy the very spot we are in search of—the place where the treasure was hidden.'

'Jupiter!' exclaimed the skipper, in blank amazement.

'Are you sure of that, old fellow?' I inquired, as soon as I could recover from my surprise.

'Unini says so, and that's enough for me,' was the confident answer.

'Poor old chap!' I thought to myself, 'he's hard hit.'

Nevertheless his words gave both me and Dick something to think about; and, moreover, before the day was much older, we felt that there was every excuse for his condition.

We were steaming away at the rate of five or six knots an hour against a stiffish current. The sun was pouring down upon us from a cloudless sky, and we were almost gasping for breath under the very in-

adequate little awning. Dick was steering; I was smoking a cigarette and studying my map; while Mac was on the lookout forward. Absence of any apparent danger—for we kept the middle of the broad river—together with the moist, enervating heat of this densely wooded region, made us all rather lax in our several duties and occupations. I could not help noticing, for instance, that Mac's attention appeared to be pretty evenly divided between the door of the cabin behind him and the river-course ahead.

Judging by the well-nigh vertical rays of the sun, it was almost noon when a peculiar sound struck our ears.

'Hillo! what was that?' cried Dick, while Mac sprang to his feet in a great hurry.

'Sounded like a half-volley of musketry,' I said.

'Or the rattle of kettle-drums,' suggested Mac.

'Well, at all events, we're safe enough out here in mid-stream,' said Dick; and then he added almost immediately, 'But hillo! what are we coming to now?'

What were we coming to, indeed? At Dick's words we all looked where he was looking—ahead—and we all echoed his exclamation of surprise. The river seemed to be coming to an end!

'Steady—half-speed!' cried Stavely. 'Steady now!'

The Mestizo obeyed, and our little craft quickly slowed down. Then we saw that the thickly wooded bank in front of us was an island, and that there was a channel to left and right of it. What made the island at first sight appear to block the whole of the waterway was partly its size and partly its position exactly in the centre of a slight expanse of

the river-bed. It was only when close up that the passages on either hand could be discerned. Just as the skipper ported his helm to take what appeared to be rather the wider channel of the two, the peculiar drum-like roll burst forth again, but this time the sound was much nearer and more distinct. It lasted perhaps five seconds, and had scarcely ceased when Unini rushed from her cabin and in loud, earnest tones cried out some warning in Spanish, at the same time pointing her finger towards the other channel. Her words seemed to electrify M'Cormick. He turned and rushed to the wheel, shouting, 'We're going wrong. Starboard your helm, Dick! Hard a-starboard, for your life!'

At the same time he lent his powerful aid to change the vessel's course, while I called out to Pedro to slow down a little till we saw whether the *Argo* would weather the projecting point of the island and get into the right passage.

CHAPTER IX.

DESPERATE STRAITS.



ICK was too genuinely dumfounded for the moment to resent any interference with his own peculiar province as skipper. Indeed, the sudden turmoil was not a little disconcerting to both of us. There was no apparent cause for it—which made it all the more alarming, as nothing is more demoralising than an unknown danger—and of course we had not understood what Unini said. From the girl's manner, however, it was evidently a matter of the greatest moment to us to choose the narrower passage.

She looked quite a picture as she stood by Mac's side, with one hand shading her eyes and the other still pointing towards the farther channel. I could not help thinking what a perfect model of feminine grace and symmetry she presented. Her long rest, too, had worked a marvellous change in her appearance even since the night before. Strangely beautiful then she was perfectly entrancing now. There was a becoming flush on her olive cheeks, and her mag-

nificent eyes sparkled with excitement, while her pretty brow was crowned by wreaths of dark, lustrous hair mounting upward in coil upon coil.

I stood spell-bound till recalled to the exigencies of the moment by an exclamation of relief from M'Cormick as the launch rounded the little headland safely. We were now past the difficulty, and steering directly into the desired channel; but still, to my surprise, Unini maintained the same watchful attitude, and the few words she spoke in a low tone to Mac caused him evident uneasiness. Stepping into the cabin, he quickly returned with a pair of glasses, and carefully scanned the tree-clad banks on either hand.

'What are you looking for now, old chap?' I inquired, fairly puzzled by his and the maiden's mysterious manner.

'Niggers—or rather Injuns,' he replied, in Western parlance, lowering his glass. 'Unini says the strange noise we heard was the beating of war-drums calling the natives to battle.'

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when Unini uttered a startled cry, and pointing towards the island, where the trees were not so dense, spoke several sentences with great emphasis and rapidity. The binoculars went up again to Mac's eyes in a twinkling, and almost as quickly descended.

'Heavens,' he exclaimed, 'it's alive with them!'

'What! with Indians?' cried Stavely apprehensively.

'Ay, thousands of them!' answered M'Cormick almost exultantly. His was one of those natures which fairly revel in danger; and he liked it laid

on thick. When in his teens and early manhood, cricket, football, polo, hunting, and other games and sports of merry England afforded the needful excitement. But after serving as a soldier in various parts of the world, experiencing the wild and risky life of frontier stations, and having more than once tasted the mad delirium of desperate fighting, he was not so easily satisfied. It required the prospect of a hostile encounter to thoroughly arouse him.

Handing me the glasses, he sprang towards the machine-gun and commenced pulling off its canvas cover in readiness for action. Unini quickly followed, stepping upon the little platform beside him. But the demon of battle had temporarily ousted the goddess of love from the ex-soldier's breast, and sternly he ordered her back to her cabin. Then, relenting a moment at her look of genuine surprise and reproach, he took her by the hand to lead her away. But she was not to be so easily mollified. Her hot Southern blood had been roused. A princess of the Incas could not brook being ordered about like a menial. Her colour heightened and her dark eyes flashed angrily as, snatching away her hand, she spoke no word, but turning proudly on her heel, retired into her cabin.

There was a look of mingled admiration and chagrin on Mae's honest face as he watched her disappear. For the moment he was too disconcerted to do anything to retrieve his blunder, and ere he could collect himself sufficiently to follow the incensed damsel and make his humble apologies, more pressing matters were forced upon his attention. Dick had stopped the launch, and I was scanning the island

and both banks of the river with the glasses, when once more the harsh crash of the savage war-drums burst upon our ears. No sooner did the sound cease than Mac's voice rang out cheerily :

'Now, boys, clear the deck for action. We've got to run the gauntlet of this island, and it's simply bristling with bow and spear men!'

The old campaigner seemed to take it for granted that he was to assume the leadership when there was fighting to be done, and neither Dick nor I felt inclined to question his action.

'Raise the guard-screen, Phil,' he continued; 'and you, Dick, be ready to start the vessel so soon as I give the word.'

Although not feeling particularly happy, we caught some of our leader's cheery *sang-froid*, and replied and acted accordingly. For several minutes we were all hard at work. Dick descended to the engine-room to apprise the Mestizo of the situation, and assist him in replenishing the furnace and getting up all possible steam; while Mac busied himself in preparing the Maxim and storing a good supply of ammunition within easy reach.

For my own part, I did not need further counsel to hoist the guard-screen. My survey had revealed the island swarming with natives, all decked in war-paint and feathers and armed to the teeth. The right bank of the river also was equally thronged, but the left was scarcely occupied. I wondered if this was the reason that our fair passenger had so urgently directed us to take the latter course, and if so, how she had discovered that it was the safer one; for her warning was given before she had time to see

that one bank was more completely dominated by the Indians than the other. We learnt afterwards, however, that when descending the river with her captors she had noticed that they chose the passage next the left bank; and she overheard the elder Indian telling his companion that the other one was called 'The Stranger's Grave,' because there was a dangerous whirlpool about half-way down it where unwary travellers generally perished.

On hearing the war-drums, Unini, knowing their import and remembering the treacherous whirlpool, lost no time in warning her preservers against it. She rightly divined that the Indians would choose this spot, and attempt to bar the passage of the dreaded white men up their river.

If we had known then what we learnt later—that no expedition of white men, or even one commanded by white men, that had passed that spot had ever returned—we should not have so lightly undertaken to force a passage. Indeed, as it was, Dick and I felt none too happy about the affair. It was our first experience of savage warfare, or, in fact, warfare of any kind, and we were not quite sure that we appreciated it. Mac, however, was in his element. Taking up his position behind the Maxim, he called out to us to know if we were ready. Then, without waiting for a reply, which perhaps he guessed we might have some diffidence in making—though I am sure we would rather have died than knowingly have betrayed the least sign of trepidation—he called out:

'Start your ship, captain.'

'Start her!' repeated Dick, hailing the Mestizo

below. 'Half-speed!' he cried a moment later; and then again, 'Full speed ahead!'

'Bravo! Keep her as close as you can to the farther bank,' cried Mac, as the little vessel gradually forged ahead.

There were narrow loopholes, closed by slides, in the guard-screen; and taking up my position in the bows, I drew one of these slides half-down to obtain a good view ahead. It was evident that the plans of the Indians had been partially frustrated by our altered course, they doubtless having counted upon our choosing the wider channel. I could see hundreds of them plunging into the water from the island, and with bows and arrows held aloft, swimming to the opposite bank. It was easy to divine their intention; but they had not reckoned on the power of steam propulsion. Before they could reach the farther side we were upon them, and they had their work fully cut out to avoid being run down.

Meanwhile their fellows on the island were making things lively for us. The moment we got within range they commenced shooting their arrows at us, to the accompaniment of the fiercest shouts and yells.

'Look out, boys—lie low!' cried our commander, himself suiting the action to the word and dropping prone beneath the bulwark.

His position was the most exposed of any, owing to the gun-platform being raised sufficiently to give the weapon a clear range every way. Dick was fairly protected by a sort of double awning of thick tarpaulin erected over the wheel; and I was able to stand close under the guard-screen. It was now that we found the advantage of this contrivance,

though it was fortunate for us that only one bank of the river was occupied by our savage enemies; for the most active of their bowmen climbed into the high trees in the endeavour to overshoot our defences, and were foiled only by our keeping close to the opposite shore. As it was, however, we had to be very careful not to expose ourselves at the loopholes, or move away from the guard-screen, for soon a perfect hail of missiles rattled against it or flew overhead.

‘Hurrah! What fun!’ cried Mac. ‘We’re getting along finely. This fusillade amuses them and doesn’t hurt us, so we won’t retaliate with our “Medea.”’

We were now nearly half-way through the narrow channel, and the Indians seemed perfectly frantic at their inability to stop us. Their savage cries and yells increased every minute. So great, indeed, was the din that at last we could not make ourselves heard without shouting to one another at the highest pitch of our voices. More than once Dick narrowly missed steering our little *Argo* into the bank we were hugging, through mistaking the direction I gave him; and at length he ran her aground on a little sand-spit scarcely a hundred yards from the open river. The exultant yell that went up from the savages when they perceived this mishap was enough to daunt the stoutest hearts; and truly it made some of ours beat wildly.

For a moment even Mac seemed dumfounded at the catastrophe. It was indeed a terrible thing to be stranded in such a position, with thousands of blood-thirsty savages ready to swoop down upon us. And it was quickly manifest that they did not mean to

miss their opportunity. Ere we had fully realised our position, or formed any plan for mitigating it, we saw our fierce foes plunging into the river by hundreds, and in less than five minutes we were completely surrounded.

CHAPTER X.

A FIGHT TO A FINISH.



BUT we had not been idle those few minutes. We had no intention of being butchered like sheep in a pen. Mac and I quickly devised schemes of defence, and then lost no time in putting them in action; while Dick, ably seconded by the Mestizo, did all in his power to get the steamer off the sand-bank.

‘Back her! Full speed astern!’ shouted Dick. ‘Back her—back her, I say!’

But it was no use. Not a foot would she budge, though the engine puffed and snorted, and the reversed screw churned the water into foam.

‘It’s no go, old fellow!’ cried Mac. ‘We’re hard and fast. So look out for squalls!’

‘The only way we could get her off,’ I struck in, ‘would be to pass a rope round one of those trees on the bank and haul her into deep water with the windlass.’

‘Ay; but who’s going to take the rope ashore?’ queried Dick rather sharply.

‘I will,’ promptly replied Mac, ‘if you’ll wait till

we've cleared the course a bit. Just lend a hand with this hose-pipe.'

We had got out the fire-hose and attached it to the steam-pump in readiness for the expected assault, for Mac's experience taught him that nothing was more effectual than boiling water against naked savages. While Dick and I unrolled the hose and drew it on deck, Pedro filled a large tub with steaming water from the boiler, and inserted the suction-pipe.

Meanwhile Mac had apprised Unini of what was taking place, and begged her to keep within her cabin, promising to return to her if matters became desperate. A minute later he was at his old post behind the Maxim, with his hand upon the lever.

There had been comparative silence while the Indians were swimming towards us. They were too eager to board and overwhelm us ere we could refloat our steamer to waste breath in shouting. But this was only the lull before the breaking of the storm. Presently we could hear the beating and plashing of hundreds of swimmers, and then the hum and buzz of as many voices as they swarmed about us like angry bees.

For a time the steel guard-screen proved a difficult obstacle to surmount, several who too lightly attempted it falling back again into the river. But this did not last long. As soon as our foes had completely surrounded us, and even clustered upon the adjacent bank, they uttered a terrible yell, and dashed at the launch. The little vessel lurched and swayed heavily with the tremendous onset. The bows being aground in shallow water, and therefore more accessible, were speedily covered with the dusky assailants, while scores of others were endeavouring to clamber in at

the sides and stern. It seemed as though nothing could save us. I stood shaking with fear, but none the less grasping the nozzle of the hose-pipe, and waiting for the word of command and the starting of the steam-pump. Suddenly, just as the enemy surmounted the guard-screen and were about to spring down upon our deck, I felt the hose move and heard the engine hum, and the next moment Mac's voice rang out like a clarion:

'Now's your time, Phil. Sluice the bows!'

The boiling water was already spurting out of the nozzle as I turned it full against our assailants. Their shouts of triumph were instantly changed to yells of rage and pain as the scalding steam struck their half-naked bodies and bare heads; and in a marvellously short space of time they vanished out of sight and reach—all but half-a-dozen, who dropped upon the deck in front of me. Luckily these unwelcome intruders were as much disconcerted at finding themselves aboard and unsupported as I was at being confronted by them. A panic seized them, and turning, they scrambled back over the guard-screen even quicker than they had come.

I was mentally congratulating myself on this lucky riddance, when a flight of arrows whizzed over my head; and almost simultaneously came the grating discharge of the Maxim. Then followed a perfect babel of shrieks and yells, the hissing of steam, and the clang of blows; while high above all rose the powerful voice of our leader and the rapid *crack, crack, crack* of a revolver.

'This way, Phil—quick! Stand firm, boys. Go it, Pedro!'

These shouts were borne in upon my bewildered brain as I dashed to the assistance of my comrades in the after-part of the vessel; and I was not a moment too soon, for in spite of Pedro's brute strength, Dick's dash, and Mac's almost superhuman exertions, the enemy were gradually gaining a footing on board. Armed with hatchets and clubs, they swarmed over the guard-screen faster than my two comrades and the faithful Mestizo could deal with them. But their very numbers worked their own discomfiture. I had scarcely joined in the *mêlée* when Dick suddenly bolted into the engine-room, shouting out as he ran:

'Hurrah! hurrah! We're afloat! we're afloat!'

It was true. The weight of the savages already on board or clambering up the stern, by depressing the latter, which was in deep water, caused the vessel to slide slowly off the sand-spit, and aided by the strong current, she was beginning to drift downstream.

My first thought, however, was that the skipper had taken leave of his senses, especially when there came a loud, shrill whistle from the engine, followed by the most infernal hissing and screeching of steam. But when, a moment later, I heard and felt the beat of the engine and the rapid rotating of the screw, I perceived there was at least some method in the skipper's madness.

'Bravo, Dick! well done!' cried M'Cormick, as the *Argo* proceeded to back rapidly into mid-channel, ploughing a wide lane through the investing savages, and scaring those who had effected a lodgment on board her. Renewed hope gave us renewed courage, and lent vigour to our arms.

‘Gosh! dis am tough work, massas,’ exclaimed Pedro, who was fighting like a mad fellow.

‘Clear the deck—clear the deck!’ shouted Mac, swinging a belaying-pin, with which he had armed himself, with all his strength, and dealing death and destruction broadcast amongst the now panic-stricken Indians.

The hose was no further use to me, for I had exhausted the limited supply of hot water in repelling the invasion forward. Nevertheless I was doing my best to emulate my redoubtable companions, when I was knocked senseless by a blow from a hatchet, just as the enemy were finally worsted.

When I recovered consciousness I was lying on the couch which had been prepared for our fair protégée, and the Indian maiden herself was watching over me with as much solicitude as though she had been my own sister.

‘Unini!’ I said, gazing up at her with undisguised wonder and admiration.

‘*Si, señor?*’ she responded in low, musical tones.

‘What has happened? Why am I lying here?’

She put her finger to her lips to intimate that speaking was not allowed, and then said something in Spanish, which I could not understand. At the same time she handed me a draught of some colourless fluid, which I swallowed unquestioningly, and soon dropped off into a refreshing sleep. I must have slept many hours, for when I awoke it was quite dark, and the launch appeared to be stationary. Hearing voices outside, I called out, and Dick quickly appeared with a light.

'Hillo, old chap! how do you feel now?' he inquired, seating himself on a camp-stool beside me.

'Well, rather muddled,' I replied. 'Head aches, too; and what on earth's this?' I added, discovering for the first time that my poor cranium was swathed in bandages. 'Did I get hurt in that terrible fight?'

'Just a little, old fellow; but your skull proved hard to crack, and there's no permanent damage done.'

'That's a consolation,' I said. 'A thick skull is not always a disadvantage, it seems. But how long will this headache last, do you think?'

'Oh, not long,' answered Dick lightly; and then he added, with a laugh, 'I wish I could cure Mac's heartache as easily.'

'Ah! he seemed rather bad. But no wonder—she's a magnificent creature, Dick.'

'She is,' responded Dick, with unusual fervour. Was he, too, falling a victim to her charms? I wondered. 'What puzzles me,' he went on after a slight pause, 'is where the girl gets her wonderful grace and refinement, considering who she is.'

'Ah! your puzzle contains its own solution,' I said. 'It's just because she is who she is—a daughter of the Incas, with a dash of Spanish nobility thrown in—that she possesses such gentleness and grace. 'It's innate; it's—in fact it's *breeding*. There's no other word to express it.'

'My goodness!' exclaimed Dick, 'you're hard hit yourself; but you're quite right about the breeding, I fancy.'

'Now tell me how the fight ended,' I inquired, 'and why we are waiting here.'

'There's not much to tell that you don't know,' he answered. 'The blow that knocked you out was the last the enemy struck. I bowled the fellow over with my rifle, and the rest took to flight.'

'Well, I hope you'll be a bit quicker next time,' I said, 'and bowl the fellow over *before* he gets home with his blow instead of after.'

'I'll use my best endeavours, old chap,' responded the skipper, with his merry laugh; 'though perhaps it will be my turn next—and I doubt if I should prove as thick-headed as you.'

'Repeat that when I'm on my legs again!' I rejoined, in like jocular vein; 'and be good enough to answer my second question.'

'Certainly; but just wait a moment,' said Dick in altered tones, retiring from the cabin as quickly as he had entered.

I knew what it was. He had suddenly remembered that with my head in that state I ought to be kept perfectly quiet. He was a jovial companion and a good sportsman, but rather too thoughtless at times for a doctor, though in really serious cases nothing could exceed his skill and attention.

In about ten minutes he returned. But all I could get out of him was that it was a thick, foggy night, and too dark to do anything but anchor out in mid-stream and wait for daylight. He mixed me a cup of condensed milk and soda-water, and then, bidding me go to sleep again, withdrew and resumed his watch on deck.

It was on my tongue to ask him what had become of Unini now that I occupied her retreat; but fearing he might misconstrue my inquiry, I kept silence.

Indeed, I was conscious that I could not mention her name with the necessary indifference. Mac I supposed to be asleep in his berth, as I did not hear him about.

When I awoke the following morning it was broad daylight, and the vessel was steaming steadily onward. The cabin door was wide open, permitting the moist, scented air to enter, and mitigating the heat of the tiny apartment.

‘Mac, Dick, Pedro—where are you all?’ I cried, there being no sound of voices, only the peculiar beat of the engine and propeller.

‘Here me am, sah—jest comin’, sah,’ was the prompt reply in Pedro’s unmistakable lingo; and a moment later that worthy almost filled the narrow doorway with his square frame.

‘Where are we now, Pedro? And where are your masters?’ I asked.

‘We am in de debil’s stew-pan, I tink, sah!’ was the unexpected answer, uttered in the Mestizo’s most serio-comic manner, and with one of his broadest grins.

I frowned at this levity, but nevertheless he continued in the same strain:

‘Massa Stavely, him wake all night, now sleepy. Massa Cormick, him gone off wid de Mamaluco.’

‘McCormick gone off with the Mamaluco!’ I exclaimed, in unfeigned astonishment. ‘What do you mean, fellow?’

I had half-risen from my couch while speaking, and Pedro evidently did not like my aspect as I glared at him from beneath the bandages which encircled my head and brow. He beat a hasty retreat, crying:

‘Stop, sah! Me call de doctor, sah;’ and paying no heed to my energetic remonstrances, he proceeded to rouse poor Stavely from his sleep.

The skipper turned out in next to no time on learning that ‘Massa Berkley lost him head.’

‘Hillo, Phil, old chap! aren’t you well?’ he inquired, with a look of such genuine concern on his handsome face that I could not help smiling in spite of myself. ‘Head bad again—eh?’

‘Bother my head!’ I exclaimed. ‘It’s not that. But what does that nigger mean? Where’s Mac and’——

I stopped on perceiving the mischievous twinkle which came into Stavely’s eyes.

‘The enchantress?’ he suggested. ‘Oh, I’ll tell you all about them presently. It’s rather a long story, though, so just wait until you’ve had something to eat.’

Without giving me time to protest, he rushed off to prepare some food, leaving me consumed with curiosity, not to say chagrin.

‘Mac gone off with Unini?’ I cogitated. ‘Surely things had not come to such a pass as that! And yet that was what the Mestizo had said. Besides, Dick had confirmed, or at least not denied, the assertion. Still, what motive could they have in leaving the steamer?’ The more I thought about it the more puzzled I was, and by the time Dick returned with breakfast I had well-nigh worked myself into a fever. Dick saw his mistake, and hastened to rectify it by mixing me a soothing draught, and then commencing his narrative forthwith. What he told me was of surpassing interest.

CHAPTER XI.

UNLOOKED-FOR DEVELOPMENTS.



ICK was in such a hurry for his own breakfast that he made short work of the news he had to impart. By dint of persistent questioning, however, I managed to get all the necessary details filled in before the meal was concluded. To begin at the beginning, it seemed that after I was knocked down, and my assailant likewise floored, the Indians made no further resistance. All their efforts were concentrated on getting out of the way.

As soon as the launch reached mid-stream the order was given, 'Full speed ahead!' and before the astonished savages could recover from their momentary panic, we were clear of the crowd and steaming rapidly onward. By the time the enemy on shore discovered that we had broken through the attacking force we were practically out of danger. For a few minutes our little vessel was the mark for hundreds of arrows; but I already had been carried into the cabin, and the others kept well under cover of the guard-screen. On emerging from the channel into the broad waterway, a hearty cheer was raised by my companions and the

faithful Pedro, the guard-screen was lowered, and the *Argo* proceeded on her voyage as though nothing particular had happened.

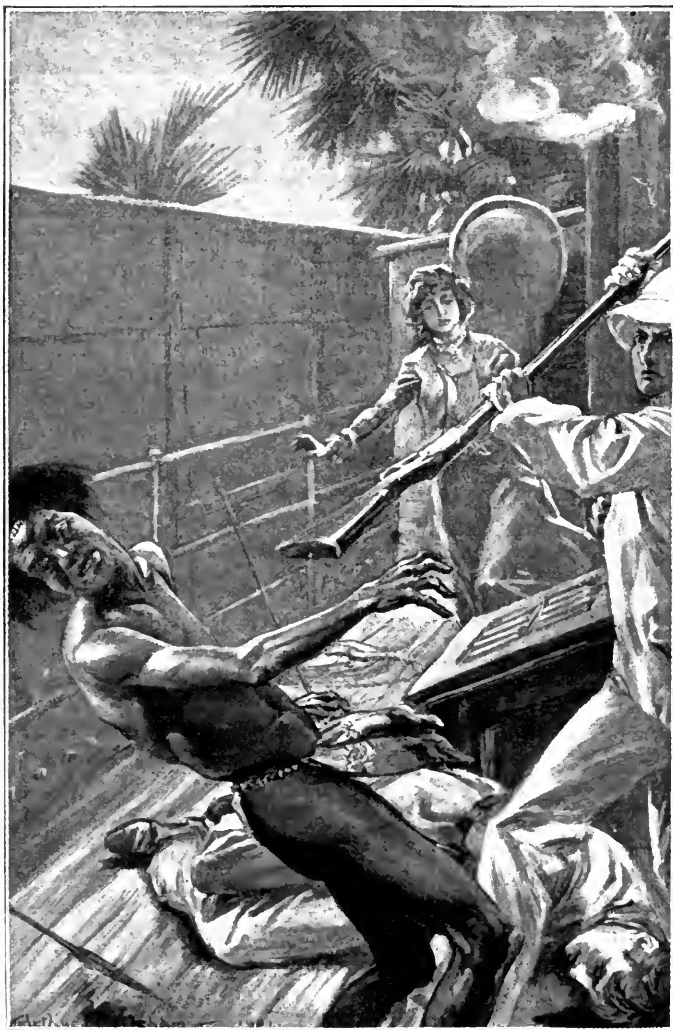
One item of information was particularly gratifying to me. It was that Unini, having seen me fall—for she was eagerly watching the fight from the saloon—unhesitatingly rushed out and, regardless of her own safety, helped to carry me in.

‘I can tell you Mac thought that was needless exposure to danger on the part of the Inca maiden,’ was Dick’s laughing comment when he finished narrating this pleasant incident.

For myself, it gave me quite a fillip, and I listened calmly to the remainder of the narration, startling as some of it was. It appeared that good progress was made throughout the rest of the day. The forest country was left behind by noon-time, and a vast plain, which Unini said was named the Pampa del Sacramento, was entered upon.

Towards evening the supply of fuel began to give out. But luckily a small belt of timber was espied skirting a little creek a mile or two farther on. On reaching the spot the launch was run close inshore, and M’Cormick and Pedro landed to cut a supply of firewood. While thus engaged they were surprised to hear the tramp of hoofs upon the plain beyond. Hurrying to the edge of the trees, they saw a party of horsemen rapidly approaching from the southward. Naturally their first thought was of hostile Indians—though until that moment horse-Indians were about the last kind of beings they expected to see.

Ordering Pedro to keep out of sight amongst the dense undergrowth, M’Cormick hastily returned on



Unini, having seen me fall . . . unhesitatingly rushed out and . . . helped to carry me in.

board the launch to warn Dick and consult with him as to their best course of action. To his surprise, he found the skipper gazing at the approaching cavalcade through his field-glass, while Unini was talking and gesticulating excitedly beside him.

The girl's back was towards Mac, but the moment she heard him spring on board she turned to meet him with a cry of joy. Then, speaking very rapidly in Spanish, she appeared to be communicating some startling news to the stalwart Briton. Meanwhile Dick, having passed the glasses to his comrade, rushed off to see that the engine was ready for any emergency.

'*Carambo!*' exclaimed Mac as soon as he had adjusted the focus and taken a good look at the horsemen; 'they are exactly as you describe, *senorita*;' and then, correcting himself, he repeated the words in Spanish.

The young girl clapped her hands in the exuberance of her delight, though Mac did not appear over well pleased.

'See!' he continued; 'they are halting at the creek to drink.'

And so they were—both men and horses evidently consumed with thirst, to judge by the long, deep draughts they took.

Having attended to the engine, Dick was surprised to find his comrade still spying through the glass, and appearing to disregard some urgent request which Unini was making to him.

On Dick inquiring what it was she wanted, Mac replied that she was anxious to communicate with the band of horsemen, as she believed they were some of her own people come in quest of her.

'Then *why don't you?*' Dick had asked innocently.

But the dark look which came into Mac's face was sufficient answer, even if he had not spoken.

'Because if she is right,' he said, 'they might wish to take her out of our custody; and if she is wrong we shall only be exposing ourselves to a fresh attack from these implacable natives.'

'They are moving towards us as it is,' was Dick's response. 'Doubtless they saw us before they descended to the plain.'

'Then for goodness' sake start the engine, and let us get out into the river!' exclaimed Mac, who was apparently imbued with but one desire—to keep possession of the Inca maid.

'What! and leave Pedro to take his chance?' cried Dick.

'Oh, bother the fellow! Isn't he on board?' was the annoyed response.

But the next moment the love-smitten commandant was himself again, and volunteering to go ashore to parley with the strangers. Unini begged to be allowed to accompany him, but Mac gently but firmly refused to let her run the risk, as he put it. Well, the upshot was that he and Pedro went to meet the mysterious band, waving green branches in token of amity. When scarcely a couple of hundred yards separated them, the leader of the Indians cantered forward alone. He was a fine-looking man, and bestrode a beautiful horse. But seemingly too chivalrous to remain mounted before a white man on foot, he halted a few paces away; then springing to the ground with marvellous grace and agility, he advanced confidently towards Mac, holding up his right hand with the palm open and forward.

McCormick imitated this friendly mode of salute, and waited for the stranger to speak. This the latter promptly did, but in a language unknown to the Briton, though evidently not unfamiliar to Pedro, for he replied in similar fashion. It turned out that the language was the one called Quichua, which is common to nearly all the more civilised natives.

However, after exchanging a few words with Pedro, the chief suddenly turned towards McCormick, and, much to the latter's surprise, addressed him in very fair Spanish. He spoke excitedly; and no wonder, for he had just learnt that the object of his journey, the Inca's daughter, was on board the strange-looking vessel which he and his followers had espied as they descended towards the river.

Mac was equally moved on discovering that the fine-looking warrior before him was Huanco, the half-brother of Unini, and commander of the Inca's forces. The young girl had often spoken of him in her conversations about her people. The upshot was that Mac invited the chief on board the launch; and a touching scene took place when, recognising her kinsman, Unini rushed forward to greet him.

Leaving the two to say all that they wished in private, Mac and Dick set to work to get a good dinner ready, not only for the chief, but for his followers also. The latter were consigned to Pedro's care, as he was able to converse with them in their own tongue. The horses were tethered out upon a plot of luscious grass growing in a natural hollow near the river, where evidently it got flooded at frequent intervals.

After hearing his half-sister's account of her rescue by the white men, Huanco showed a marked friendli-

ness and respect for his entertainers. On being shown over the launch, also, he expressed great interest and delight in her machinery and other fittings, while her mode of propulsion—by steam—was of course almost incomprehensible to him. He had heard of the wonderful uses to which fire and water were applied by the civilised nations of the earth, but he had never before seen a practical illustration of the mysterious powers they could be made to exhibit. No wonder, then, that he looked upon his newly-found friends with a considerable amount of awe as well as friendliness.

His followers were subsequently conducted over the vessel, and Pedro could scarcely contain his importance as he explained to them the uses of the various fittings and machinery. But when he took upon himself to illustrate his remarks by letting off steam, several of the Indians were so frightened that they instantly jumped into the river and swam ashore; and nothing could induce them to return on board.

Towards evening Huanco began to get restless, and declared that it was his duty to carry Unini back to her father without further delay. He had, he said, already rendered himself liable to censure for staying to rest and enjoy himself when the revered Inca was racked by anxiety for his daughter, and probably despairing of ever seeing her again. It was in vain that M'Cormick argued that food and rest were necessary both for man and beast after the long journey from Incala, and that nothing would be gained by starting before morning.

Unini would have yielded to these representations—indeed, she appeared almost reluctant to quit her

newly-found friends at such short notice—but her kinsman was firm, and though courteous to a degree which would have shamed many a man with more pretensions to civilisation, he insisted upon starting at sundown. He said that, with the rest and food his men and horses had already enjoyed, they would travel better in the cool night-air than in the hot sunshine of the following day. Moreover, they would reach the commencement of the higher ground by daybreak, and so escape the moist and unhealthy heat of the valley. Before quitting Incala he had ordered fresh horses to follow on his track, and expected to meet them in the course of the next twenty-four hours.

Seeing that it was useless trying to turn the chief from his resolve, Mac declared that he must accompany the party to Incala. He said he was tired of being cooped up in a tiny launch, and longed for a more active rôle. Boating or yachting was all very well for a change, but he must say he preferred the greater freedom of the plains and mountains, especially when he had a good horse under him.

This startling proposition was discussed in all its bearings, with the result that Huanco agreed to leave a couple of his men who had some knowledge of the river to assist Dick and Pedro in taking the launch to a spot which was agreed upon, thus also leaving two horses available for Unini and M'Cormick. The latter was in high spirits at the prospect of seeing the land of the Incas, or at least the comparatively small region or mountain plateau which, unknown to the rest of the world, still owned the beneficent and patriarchal rule of a descendant of the powerful dynasty which once ruled so large an area of western South America

—an area comprising the whole of modern Peru, as well as the greater part of Chili and Bolivia, and perhaps a small portion of what is now the Argentine Republic.

Dick acquiesced the more readily in this new scheme as it promised not only to save much valuable time, but gave a better chance of cementing and profiting by the friendship which had been so strangely and happily initiated. It was possible, even, that by accompanying Unini and her escort to this relic of a once mighty empire, Mac might be able to enlist the aid of its ruler in the enterprise we had undertaken. At all events he would be able to gather much useful information regarding the country to be traversed, and the opposition likely to be encountered from the fierce inhabitants of the treasure region.

Owing to the somewhat tortuous course of the river in its meandering through the Pampa del Sacramento and the forest regions beyond, it was calculated that Mac and Unini, with their escort, would be almost at the capital of Incala by the time the steamer could reach the highest navigable point at the confluence of the Apurimac. It was thought that our little launch might be able to ascend the latter tributary for some distance; but if not, we were to wait there until Huanco could send an armed force to keep guard over the vessel. Upon their arrival, Dick, Pedro, and I were to set out up the right bank of the stream, under the guidance of the two Indians who had been left with us. Five or six days' marching, it was reckoned, would take us to the foot of the mountains, and then we were to ascend them by a route known only to the Indians, until we came to a certain pass. There we

were to await the return of our comrade from the capital, accompanied, it was hoped, by a punitive force from the Inca to chastise the savages for their incursion into his territory and the carrying away of his daughter.

Such was the plan which had been agreed upon, and it only remained for us on board the *Argo* to do our best to carry into effect our part of the scheme.

CHAPTER XII.

VUELTA DEL DIABLO.



FOR a couple of days Dick was in sole charge of the launch, for I could only sit on deck during the coolest part of the day. But after that I recovered very quickly; and by the time we re-entered the forest region I was able to resume duty and take my share of the steering and watching.

In passing through the grassy plain, we were both struck by the sameness and the dearth of animal life, in contrast with the forest regions. These latter simply teemed with animal life, from the tiny ant to the loathsome boa-constrictor or stealthy jaguar. Butterflies and humming-birds flitted about from flower to flower. Bees and innumerable other insects kept up an incessant humming and buzzing throughout the day. Indeed, they made so much noise that it necessitated our almost having to shout to one another to make ourselves understood, unless we kept well away from the banks. Whenever we landed to cut wood or shoot game we had to be careful to don knee-boots or high leggings, for the undergrowth harboured all

kinds of noxious reptiles, of which the corral-snake, the sorrocuco, and the jarraraca were perhaps the most dangerous. The bite of the latter is particularly dreaded by the natives, as it causes terrible suffering and often death.

But it is the vegetation of the region of the Amazon and its principal tributaries which is so wonderful. Our senses at first were almost intoxicated by its amazing wealth. It would be impossible to exaggerate this feature of Brazil and the eastern lowlands of Peru. No language can do justice even to the glory of these forests. Imagine, if you can, thousands upon thousands of trees, with stems of from nine to twelve feet in diameter, standing close together and draped with all manner of climbing plants. These and the dense undergrowth of other kinds completely fill the intervals between the trees themselves, making it almost impossible to force a way through. The largest of these forest giants bear brilliant blossoms of every hue, and even the mountain slopes are clothed with trees only less huge, intermingled with the most graceful specimens of the palm and the tree-fern.

Some of these trees are highly useful as well as ornamental, as, for instance, the *Anda Gomezii*, yielding a tasteless oil which is more powerfully cathartic than castor-oil; the cacao or chocolate tree; the Brazil-wood, used for dyeing silk; the mahogany; and the valuable cinchona, which yields the famous substance we call quinine; while endless varieties of myrtle exhale a delicious perfume.

As we steamed onward up the broad Ucayali, and feasted our eyes on such prodigality of life—animal and vegetable—we almost forgot what had brought us

there. The immensity of the forest growth and the dazzling wealth and variety of the flowers, birds, and butterflies were perfectly entrancing. Our senses were lured and bewildered by the gorgeous scene even more than they had been on the lower Amazon, where these glories first met our gaze. This was doubtless owing to their greater propinquity, for, broad as the Ucayali is, it is narrow compared with the mighty Amazon; and consequently the grandeur of the primeval forest was more obtrusively evident—seeming, indeed, to shut us in on either hand by its lofty ramparts of impenetrable verdure. The river's course, too, was winding and tortuous, and every twist and bend carried us farther and more inextricably into the forest's vast and lonely depths.

‘My goodness! but this is getting rather monotonous, to say the least,’ exclaimed Dick, as the second evening after Mac's departure closed in and still there was no sign of the Apurimac or any other large confluent.

‘Weird—uncanny!’ I admitted; ‘but it cannot last for ever.’

The words were scarcely spoken before Pedro, who happened to be at the wheel, cried out:

‘Here's de riber; here's de Apurimac. And——*Gosh!*’

The final exclamation was uttered in such a tone of intense surprise and dismay that both Dick and I, repressing the cheer which had risen to our lips, sprang to the Mestizo's side. One glance ahead sufficed to explain his terrified utterance and to strike consternation into our hearts. The river was one mass of foam.

What did it mean? Where had we got to?

Such were the confused thoughts that rushed through our bewildered brains for a moment or two ere we recognised the necessity for action. I was the first to recover sufficient presence of mind to rush below and stop the engine. It had suddenly dawned upon me that we must by some inexplicable means have overshot the mark, or have turned into the wrong river. I was confirmed in this by one of the Indians crying out and gesticulating wildly to Pedro, and the words that caught my ear made me tremble in spite of myself.

‘Vuelta del Diablo! Vuelta del Diablo!’ was the ominous warning.

‘Vuelta del Diablo!’ repeated the other Indian, in accents of terror; and before any one could stop him, he jumped upon the guard-rail, and diving headlong into the river, swam for the shore.

Meanwhile Stavely had recovered his presence of mind sufficiently to take charge of the wheel and to send Pedro to relieve me at the engine.

‘Back her—full speed astern!’ he cried.

But there was no necessity for that. The danger was already averted. The screw having ceased to revolve, the little vessel was quickly arrested in its course and carried backward by the force of the current. All we had to do, therefore, was to turn about the *Argo* as speedily as possible and retrace our way down-stream. This was soon accomplished by a little skilful handling almost as darkness set in.

Then drawing close in to the bank where the scared Indian had landed, we anchored and blew our whistle; but it was all to no purpose, for the man never returned. After such a narrow escape our own nerves

were too shaky to allow of our proceeding any farther that night; so, pushing out into mid-stream, we waited for daylight. But we were not destined to obtain much sleep. Our steam-whistle and the snorting and puffing of our little engine had apparently aroused the denizens of the forest for miles around. Monkeys chattered, jaguars roared, and parrots and other birds screamed until we were driven almost distracted by the discordant noises.

‘Good gracious, what a din!’ exclaimed Dick as we retreated to our cabin and shut the door, in the vain endeavour to obtain a little quiet.

‘Yes, my word!’ I responded. ‘They call the rapids we have so narrowly escaped “The Devil’s Ruffle,” but I think we should be equally justified in naming this spot “The Devil’s Orchestra.”’

‘Ah, ah! that’s not bad for you, old chap,’ laughed Dick; and then his thoughts suddenly seemed to revert to their more serious mood, and he added in altered tones, ‘But where do you think we really are, Phil? You’ve studied the geography of these parts more than I have.’

‘Oh, there can be no doubt we’re farther south than we ought to be,’ I replied, ‘or that these rapids are really those known as Vuelta del Diablo—“The Devil’s Ruffle.” We must have passed the Apurimac somehow—probably during that tropical rain-storm last evening, when it was impossible to see more than a few yards ahead.’

‘Ah, that’s likely enough,’ acquiesced Dick. ‘And haven’t you noticed,’ he asked, ‘how ill at ease Chuco has seemed since then, as if he had lost his bearings, and consequently his confidence in himself as pilot?’

‘Ay, I noticed there was something wrong with him. But at all events he has stuck to his post and not shown us a clean—or, more strictly speaking, dirty—pair of heels like his comrade.’

‘Poor beggar!’ responded Dick, ‘I expect our steam-engine and electric light were too much for his untutored brain; and when he heard the dread shout of “Vuelta del Diablo!” and saw the seething waters right in front, he had but one lucid thought—to get to land with the least possible loss of time. But go on, old chap; I’m interrupting you sadly, and you haven’t finished what you were saying about our whereabouts.’

‘Oh, I don’t know more than that the rapids, which, thanks to Pedro’s alertness, we have just escaped, are situated a short distance below the junction of the Urubamba and the Ene, whose united waters form the Ucayali; so that we must have steamed a hundred miles beyond the Apurimac before reaching the rocks which bar all further navigation of this magnificent river.’

‘Pedro says that at first he took the increasing current and the turbid waters ahead for the inflowing of a big river—of the Apurimac; but a moment later he caught sight of the foaming rapids beyond, and knew that something was wrong.’

‘Well, it was a narrow escape, and ought to serve as a warning to us to be more cautious in future,’ I said, preparing to make myself as comfortable as I could for the night, and endeavouring to ignore the exaggerated sort of cat-concert without.

‘Yes, my word! Good-night,’ responded Dick, who had already ensconced himself very snugly in his berth.

‘Good’—I began—‘HEAVENS!’ I concluded, as the floor of the cabin suddenly heaved beneath my feet, pitching me headlong across my couch, while Dick turned an involuntary somersault out of his berth on to the top of me.

At the same time all the lights were extinguished, and cries and yells of terror and dismay came from our coloured friends on deck. It seemed as though a mine had been discharged beneath us, or our little vessel had drifted somehow into a frightful rapid, and was being flung and tossed about helplessly; for a series of lifts and lurches, thuds and thumps, made it almost impossible for us to regain or keep our feet.

‘What on earth’s the matter?’ cried Dick, vainly endeavouring to find the door.

‘Heaven only knows!’ I answered, groping about on hands and knees with the same object.

‘Must be an earthquake, or some such terrible convulsion of nature,’ continued Dick, struggling to appear calm, but ending with a decided quaver in his voice.

At that moment the door was burst open. Pedro’s burly form was outlined against the lesser darkness without, and his voice called out:

‘Oh, sahs, quick—all de debils am got loose! Dey carrying us straight below on deir backs!’

While delivering this extraordinary piece of information the Mestizo was holding on with might and main to the brass rail on either side of the entrance.

‘What do you mean, man?’ I asked, struggling to my feet and peering about me.

It was a fine, starlight night, and, except in the

shadow of the densely wooded banks, objects were not difficult to discern even at some little distance.

‘You come look, sah!’ was Pedro’s answer while cautiously working his way to the side of the launch.

As soon as we could, Dick and I followed, gripping anything stable that we could lay our hands on. The animal concert was still going on ashore, but other sounds now occupied our attention—sounds as of a shoal of porpoises, walruses, or other denizens of the deep disporting themselves around and under the boat. But such creatures could not be several thousand miles from the sea! What, then, was creating all the turmoil? Such thoughts and speculations as these passed rapidly through our minds as, clutching the guard-rail, we gazed down into the river. A moment later simultaneous exclamations of surprise burst from us when we saw what really was happening. Huge forms were rising and sinking, blowing and plashing, racing and pushing, and crowding all about our little steamer, carrying it hither and thither as though it were merely a plaything for them.

‘Good gracious, they’re crocodiles!’ ejaculated Stavely, in tones of consternation.

‘Alligators, you mean,’ I responded. And so they were, but in such numbers as I had never heard or read of before. They seemed to fill the river from bank to bank.

‘They’ll wreck us for certain if we can’t drive them off!’ said Dick. ‘They appear to be making a regular butt of us. My! that was a near go!’ he added as the *Argo* gave a dangerous lurch sideways.

‘We must do something,’ I said, casting a glance towards the Maxim.

Dick comprehended my meaning, and responded, 'Ay, it's our only hope.'

Luckily Mac had shown me how to work the gun; and equally luckily its carriage was firmly bolted to the platform, otherwise the rolling and lurching of the vessel must have pitched it overboard.

My mind once made up, I was not long in working my way to the poop. The weapon was always kept loaded and ready for action, so that I only had to remove the tarpaulin cover, withdraw the safety-bolt, adjust the aim, and open fire. Simple as all this was, however, it was none so easy of accomplishment with the uncertain movements of the launch, caused by the alligators alternately crowding and pressing against the little vessel, or plunging beneath her, occasionally almost lifting one end or the other of her out of the water.

At length, with Pedro's invaluable help, I got to work, he also assisting in keeping me from being jerked off my feet; and meanwhile Dick strove to keep the launch as near the middle of the river as possible by manipulating the wheel at every favourable opportunity. There was no necessity for an elaborate aim, as it would have been impossible to miss the dense mass of alligators; so, merely depressing the muzzle of the gun sufficiently, I poured into them a hail of bullets, training the weapon in an arc from side to side of the river as I fired over the stern.

The result of this new move was as extraordinary as it was unlooked-for, and for some minutes it seemed likely to be the end of us. Instead of easing the pressure on our steamer, it produced the opposite effect; for, although scores of the saurians were soon slaugh-

tered, the others were maddened by the wounds they received or the smell of blood, and rushing hither and thither in dense masses, threatened each moment to overwhelm us. Our frail little craft was carried to and fro like a cockle-shell, and more than once we gave ourselves up for lost as it careened till the bulwarks almost touched the water.

The moment the launch righted, however, I re-directed the deadly fire of the Maxim upon the raging brutes. I knew it was our only chance, and at length its effects began to be perceptible. The masses were broken up and their rushes impeded by the number of carcasses which floated on the surface. The survivors, too, began tardily to evince a dread of approaching the launch.

‘Hurrah! We’ve worsted them! Bravo, Phil!’ cried Dick, whose mercurial temperament caused his spirits to rise as quickly in success as they were apt to fall in misfortune.

‘Yes, thank Heaven!’ I responded. ‘We’re out of their toils at last—the brutes!’

It was so. The danger had ceased almost as suddenly as it arose. Freed from the swarming alligators, the vessel once more floated steadily downstream, enabling me to handle the Maxim with ease, and setting free the Mestizo to attend to the engine, while Dick was able to steer the vessel as he liked.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHAT THE SEARCH-LIGHT REVEALED.



NLY those who have experienced a like extremity of peril can comprehend the relief we felt on realising that we had escaped from our strange but none the less terrible predicament.

‘My goodness, but that was a narrow squeak!’ exclaimed Dick, drawing a long breath. ‘Here, Pedro,’ he continued, ‘get up steam as quickly as you can. I should like to put as many miles as possible between those brutes and ourselves.’

‘Ay, ay, sah!’ was the Mestizo’s ready response. ‘Me bery glad to give de debils a wide berth.’

‘It puzzles me where all the “debils” came from,’ I said, ‘to borrow Pedro’s appropriate term.’

‘And me too,’ responded Dick; ‘and what’s more,’ he continued emphatically, ‘I’d no idea alligators were such formidable creatures.’

‘Numbers are always formidable,’ I answered rather dogmatically—‘*exempli gratiâ*, wolves; and even such insignificant creatures as rats, locusts, bees, wasps, or, to descend the scale still lower, mosquitoes, gnats, or the tiny harvest-bugs!’

‘You forget the common house-fly,’ responded Dick. ‘I believe it still remains one of the biggest plagues, not only of Egypt, but of every other warm country.’

‘You’re right, old chap; I can bear you out in that from my own experience of them,’ I said.

Dick was on the point of making some further observation, when the Mestizo called out that steam was up.

‘Bravo! Then forge ahead,’ answered the skipper.

‘Stay!’ I said. ‘Hadn’t we better turn on the search-light? Otherwise we shall be running into the bank or something.’

‘That’s well thought of, old fellow,’ answered Dick. ‘Hi, there, Pedro!’ he called; ‘connect the dynamo.’

A few minutes later a powerful ray of light shot from the launch’s bows and illumined the river for a long distance ahead. As it did so a cry of intense surprise burst simultaneously from the skipper’s lips and my own. Instead of beholding a long stretch of dark water, as we expected, a very different sight met our view. The river appeared to have come to an abrupt end. In place of a broad waterway, there lay before us a muddy flat bounded by swamps.

But that which startled and amazed us most of all was what confronted us upon the flat. In the forefront was a defiant array of open-jawed alligators—huge, loathsome beasts—while in the rear hundreds of their young disported themselves in the mud.

‘Good heavens! Alligators again! Where *have* we got to now?’ cried Dick, in tones of direst consternation and dismay.

‘Death and destruction if you don’t stop the launch,’ I replied, darting away to Pedro’s assistance.

‘Stop her!—stop her! Full speed astern!’ yelled Dick at the top of his voice.

Luckily we were not going faster than about six miles an hour at the time, Pedro having only just got the engines nicely to work when the search-light showed us what we were charging into. And yet, promptly as we acted, the *Argo* ran stem on into the muddy shore ere we could quite stop her.

‘Crianzal del Cocodrilo!’ cried Chuco at this moment, awakening from the sound sleep into which, with Indian stoicism, he had fallen as soon as we were clear of the first alligator pack. ‘Crianzal del Cocodrilo!’ he repeated in his broken Spanish.

‘What is the fellow saying, Pedro? What does he mean?’ I asked.

‘Dat must be de name ob dis place, sah. “De Debils’”—No; “De Alligators’ Nursery.” Oh sah,’ he continued, in great trepidation—for, with all his strength and courage, the Mestizo was extremely superstitious—‘de debil himself am bring us here!’

‘Pooh!’ I said; ‘he sha’n’t keep us here at all events. Tell Chuco to come and lend a hand with this hawser, and we’ll soon put matters right.’

‘We’re stuck fast enough,’ cried Dick, hurrying down from the poop, where he had rushed after the vessel struck the bank. ‘What on earth shall we do? Those infernal alligators threaten to give us a warm reception if we attempt to land.’

‘And we shall deserve it, too, if we are so foolish as to interfere with them unnecessarily,’ I said. ‘They would only be obeying their natural instincts in fighting in defence of their young. Besides,’ I added, ‘I can see

no object in landing on this flat. We must lose no time in hauling off the launch.'

'Certainly. But how do you propose to do it without first lightening her of all that is movable?'

'If you'll take charge of the engine,' I answered, 'I'll undertake to get the *Argo* clear without removing so much as a hand-bucket.'

'Then go ahead, by all means,' was the skipper's somewhat huffy response as, turning on his heel, he retired into the engine-room.

My first impulse was to follow and soothe my comrade's ruffled dignity, for it was evident that he resented my interference, as he doubtless considered it, in the management of the launch. But Pedro and the Indian were awaiting my orders, and the situation was urgent. A glance ashore showed that the alligators were manifesting a disposition to attack us, doubtless urged thereto by curiosity no less than anger. With upturned snouts and glaring eyes, they kept shambling nearer and nearer, until at last their ungainly forms and murderous jaws were ranged in a compact semicircle scarcely a stone's-throw from us.

Telling Pedro to raise the guard-screen while Chuco payed out the hawser for me, I fastened one end of it around my waist. I had noticed a huge tree growing half in the water some fifty yards in the rear of the launch, and my idea was to utilise it for hauling her off. I always had, or at least flattered myself that I had, a faculty for emergencies; and this was a case where my mechanical instincts likewise came into play.

There was just light enough to serve my purpose, and picking up a coil of rope and a pulley-block, I lowered myself into the dingy and rowed to the tree.

After taking a turn round its vast trunk, I stood up on the thwarts and secured my rope and pulley-block; then, passing the end of the hawser through the block, I again attached it firmly to my waist preparatory to rowing back to the steamer.

At the very moment, however, that I was about to resume my seat and the oars, a huge alligator which had approached unnoticed made a grab at my legs. It missed them, but struck the little boat with such force as to send it completely from under me; and, to my horror, I fell plump upon the alligator's back! My natural impulse was to get off again as quickly as possible. But I had fallen astride, and before I could extricate myself I perceived that the brute was as much frightened as I was at the unexpected turn of events; so, changing my purpose, I determined to stay where I was, especially as it luckily occurred to me that I was really safer there than I should be trying to swim back to the boat or the launch.

This was brought home to me when I saw the savage way in which the alligator seized and crunched up my pith helmet, which had fallen from my head and was floating on the water. But whether it was annoyed at the insipidity of the article, or tired of carrying eleven stone and a half upon its back, I cannot say. I only know that it suddenly changed its tactics, and in place of swimming steadily towards land, it began circling round and diving beneath the surface.

Although I gripped the flanks of my loathsome steed with all my might, I soon felt that I was becoming exhausted, and as a last desperate resource I drew my hunting-knife and plunged it deeply into the alligator's neck. This happened to be the best thing

that I could have done from my point of view, for henceforth the half-maddened brute appeared to be possessed of but one idea—to rejoin its friends ashore with the utmost possible despatch. Turning its snout landwards, it set off as fast as it could swim almost straight for the *Argo*. This suited me admirably; and now, having something to hold on by, I was in no danger of being swept from the animal's back by the speed with which it dashed through the water.

‘Bravo, Phil! sit tight. Well done, old chap!’

‘Gosh, sah, you ride like de debil!’

Such were the exclamations that greeted me as I careered past the *Argo's* stern. The next minute I found myself stranded on the muddy flat, and my unwilling mount wobbling away as fast as it could to join its astonished species.

I had withdrawn my knife as I slipped from the creature's back, and lost no time in making for the launch. But although the distance was trifling, I soon found that I should have my work cut out to reach it before the alligators were upon me. Several preliminary grunts and snorts told me that they were already working themselves up for a charge.

‘Make haste! For heaven's sake make haste!’ cried Dick, who was watching me, rifle in hand.

But the mud was both deep and tenacious, and the heavy hawser greatly impeded me. I struggled onward with all the speed that I could muster, yet my progress was comparatively slow.

‘Quick, sah! Catch hold of dis rope, sah!’ yelled Pedro, throwing me the end of a coil from the bows.

‘Cut the hawser—they're coming!’ cried Dick excitedly.

And in truth they were. A glance over my shoulder showed me that the ferocious saurians were charging down upon me. At first the sight had a paralysing effect, and I stood rooted to the ground.

Crack! went Dick's rifle.

This roused me from my momentary stupor, and seizing the rope which Pedro had thrown me, I twisted it round my arm and sprang forward. The Mestizo hauled away lustily at his end, and soon I was under the bows of the launch and being half-dragged up its side.

'Look out—pull up your feet!' shouted the skipper once more in his stentorian voice.

Luckily my hands already were on the gunwale, and I lost no time in obeying the warning. But I was only just in time. As I drew up my legs I heard beneath me a noise like the closing of a steel trap, and felt something graze my heel. At the same time there was another rifle-shot, and looking down, I saw a huge alligator roll over and over against the launch in its death-struggles.

'Well done, sah! Dat debil got him desarts!' exclaimed Pedro, grinning with satisfaction, as he dragged me safely on deck.

'My gracious, but that was a narrow squeak, old chap!' ejaculated Dick, running to help me up.

'Ay, but a miss is as good as a mile, you know; and I've carried out my purpose, so what odds?'

'Have you really made fast to the tree?' asked Dick almost doubtingly.

'Yes, pulley and rope all complete. You can haul your vessel off as soon as you like,' I answered, scraping the mud from my boots.

‘The sooner the better, then. Just look at those alligators,’ responded Dick. ‘They’ll board us yet if we don’t mind.’

Springing on the bows, I surveyed the scene for a few moments while Dick attached the hawser to the windlass. The day was breaking, and there was sufficient light to distinguish objects at a considerable distance. But it was the immediate vicinity that concerned us just then. Some scores of dark, clumsy-looking brutes were grunting and romping about the vessel as if trying to find an entrance. Every now and then one would clamber on to the back of its fellows and poke its ugly nose over the iron guard-screen. But so far not one had succeeded in getting any farther. They were, however, very much enraged, and there was no telling when they might not make a combined rush, and break their way into the launch by sheer force and weight of numbers. To listen to their savage grunts and the way they snapped their jaws was anything but pleasant, and I soon made my way back to the stern, where Dick and Pedro were busily engaged in turning the windlass.

‘Come and lend a hand,’ cried Dick; ‘she’s moving already.’

It was true; and as soon as I took hold beside my chum, and we all worked in unison, the *Argo* slid gently back into deep water without any great effort on our part. A hearty cheer burst from our lips on finding ourselves afloat once more. The engine was set going, and soon we had unfastened our hawser and pulley from the friendly tree, and were steaming slowly out of the false channel into the main river.

As we emerged from the former into the latter it

was easy to see how the mistake had been made, for the entrance to the blind-alley, as Dick called it, was nearly as wide as the river proper. Besides, as I pointed out to my comrade, it was not at all improbable that our little vessel had been carried into the lagoon by the rushes of the alligators. The frightened creatures would naturally endeavour to regain their native swamp—*Crianzal del Cocodrilo* ('The Crocodiles' Breeding-place'), as Chuco had termed it—until finally beaten back by the fire of the Maxim.

CHAPTER XIV.

‘LOS INDIOS!’



HIS not the Apurimac! What in the world do you mean, Pedro?’

Such was the exclamation that arrested my attention all at once on the day following our adventures with the alligators. Since early morning we had been steaming up a broad tributary which we took for the Apurimac; and with Chuco acting as pilot and Dick steering, all had gone well until this moment. I paused in my occupation of cleaning the Maxim to hear Pedro’s reply.

‘No, sah; dis am de wrong riber, Chuco say. De Apurimac flow from de Vilcanota Mountains in de south. Dis riber ebidently come from de vest.’

‘Pooh! How can he tell where it comes from?’ responded Dick incredulously.

‘Instinct, no doubt,’ I broke in. ‘Instinct sometimes proves a more reliable guide than science.’

‘Instinct has not prevented him from making one mistake, and how are we to know that it is true now?’ was Dick’s somewhat disconcerting rejoinder.

'Besides,' he continued, 'if this is not the Apurimac, what other river can it be?'

'The Pachitea, perhaps,' I suggested. 'My guide-book says it is one of the chief tributaries of the Ucayali, flowing from the west.'

'Yes, dat am de name Chuco gib it,' said the Mestizo confirmatorily.

'I don't care what they call it,' responded Dick, who was in one of his reckless moods. 'It has a good depth of water, and if it doesn't take us very much out of our course, that's the chief desideratum.'

'But we ought to follow Huanco's directions,' I protested, 'or we shall miss the escort he promised to send us.'

'Ah, I had forgotten that,' said Dick more calmly. 'Let's hear what Chuco has to say for himself.'

On being called and interrogated, the Indian persisted in his statement that we were not on the Apurimac. He was almost as decided in his belief that the river we were navigating was the Pachitea, and accounted for his mistake by the speed of the launch when travelling down-stream misleading him.

'Ask him,' said Dick, 'if we could not reach the appointed meeting-place as quickly by taking this route as by returning and ascending the Apurimac.'

Pedro interpreted the question, and likewise Chuco's reply. The latter, to my surprise, was affirmative. The Indian declared that he had once descended the Pachitea in a canoe almost from the base of the Cordilleras. It was a great many years ago, but he distinctly remembered that no difficulties were encountered except from the Tapuyas—savages who inhabited the region.

‘Oh, were they troublesome?’ inquired Dick somewhat dubiously.

‘The Tapuyas are very fierce,’ replied the guide, ‘but they will not face the big fire-tube; and their paddles are slow beside your engine.’

‘Humph!’ said Dick; ‘I don’t much like those gentry you speak of. We had enough of them on the Ucayali; and our chief fire-eater is unfortunately now absent.’

‘Ay, we should miss M’Cormick badly if it came to a scrimmage,’ I said. ‘Ask the Indian, Pedro, how we are to manage the distance between the head of navigation on the Pachitea and the meeting-place beyond the Apurimac. If he is correct as to the respective courses of these two rivers, there must be a considerable tract of country intervening.’

‘Exactly,’ acquiesced the skipper; ‘and how are we to traverse it?’

His eagerness for the Pachitea had sensibly abated.

Chuco’s reply was that a smaller river, flowing from the southward, joined the Pachitea near the base of the mountains. It was a considerable stream, and he thought it would have sufficient depth of water for our launch for a long distance. By the time it became too shallow, he said, we ought to be within a few days’ march of the spot where Huanco had appointed to meet us. If, on the other hand, we retraced our course to the Apurimac, it was more than doubtful whether we should be able to ascend it for any distance on account of the rapids.

‘It seems to me, then, that although the Apurimac is the most direct route, this is by far the easiest and the quickest,’ I said.

'You forget that we shall probably have to reckon with the Tapuyas,' objected Dick.

'No,' I said; 'but Chuco evidently thinks less of them than of the rapids of the Apurimac.'

'I'd rather take my chance of the latter,' retorted the skipper, 'than of a crowd of blood-thirsty savages such as those we encountered on the Ucayali.'

Nevertheless the good fellow finally assented to continuing our journey up the Pachitea, and, if necessary, running the gauntlet of the Tapuyas. The river we thus were committed to seemed by its depth of water and its gentle current to be a natural highway into the heart of Peru. All that day and the next we steamed uninterruptedly up it. Its banks, like those of all the other rivers of this low-lying part, were clothed with impenetrable verdure, the huge trees and luxuriant undergrowth shutting us in like emerald cliffs. The atmosphere resembled that of a Turkish bath more than anything else, so moist and warm was it; while drenching showers of rain fell at frequent intervals.

'I sha'n't be sorry when we get out of this,' I said. 'It makes one feel as weak as a kitten.'

'Yes; I could sleep all day,' responded Dick, yawning. 'It's awfully relaxing, this perpetual vapour-bath.'

'It was most fortunate we struck this river instead of the doubtful Apurimac,' I said; 'for just imagine having to march on foot in a climate like this!'

'March! I couldn't have walked a mile to save my life,' exclaimed Dick.

'Oh, you don't know what you could do till you have been tried,' I said. 'It's marvellous what exer-

tions a man is capable of when Death is on his heels!’

‘Ay, you may be right, old chap,’ acquiesced Dick thoughtfully. ‘The instinct of self-preservation is scarcely likely to be less developed in human beings than in the lower animals; and I’ve seen a hunted fox, after lying down apparently quite exhausted, jump up again when the hounds approached and make a fresh bid for life. Ay, and what is more,’ he added, ‘actually succeed in making good its escape.’

I was about to make some response when suddenly my attention was diverted by an exclamation from Chuco, who was on the lookout forward.

‘What is it?’ I asked.

The Indian doubtless understood from the tone of my voice what I said, although I spoke in English. Nevertheless he did not reply at once, but continued gazing intently at the right bank of the stream.

‘Those confounded Tapuyas, perhaps!’ whispered Dick apprehensively. ‘Put up the guard-screen, Phil.’

‘*Guarda—los Indios!*’ cried Chuco at the very moment that I seized the lever and threw up the shield.

It was well I had not delayed, for a hail of arrows struck the steel-sheeting as it flew into position, and others passed overhead.

‘Good heavens!’ cried Dick, ‘I feared as much. What’s to be done now?’

‘Keep a straight course and a stout heart,’ I answered as cheerily as I could, though I would have given a good deal to have been somewhere else at that moment.

Dick's only response was a significant glance at the gun, as though to remind me that that was the only sort of Maxim which the circumstances called for. Then he shouted to Pedro, who was peering out of the stoke-hole with a half-scared, half-comical grin on his ebony face: 'Hi, there! keep up steam.'

'And be ready to turn on the search-light,' I added; for the sun had just set and daylight was waning rapidly. In fact, shut in as we were by the dark forest on either hand, it was only a question of a few minutes before we should be enveloped in inky blackness.

'Yas, sah—all right, sah!' was the Mestizo's ready response; and disappearing into the engine-room, he struck up one of those cheery negro melodies of which he seemed to have an inexhaustible supply.

There was soon a grim accompaniment from the river-banks in the form of yells and war-cries and the rattle of missiles against the steamer's sides.

'My goodness! we're in for it now and no mistake,' I said, springing on to the gun-platform and clearing the weapon for action.

The situation was not a pleasant one: a couple of Englishmen and the same number of coloured servants in a small launch on an unknown river; darkness just setting in; and hundreds, perhaps thousands, of savages lining the banks and thirsting for our blood!

'What folly it was,' I reflected, 'to have wilfully embarked on such a mad enterprise as this!' It seemed to me then—and it was not the first time, or the last, that the same thought occurred to me—that no amount of earthly treasure was worth the fearful risk we were running, or the bloodshed which

must ensue if we had to resort to our firearms in a life-and-death struggle. My unhappy cogitations were broken into by my comrade's voice calling to Pedro:

'Hi, there! Turn on the search-light.'

The order was scarcely given before a brilliant stream of light shot out in front of the launch, illuminating the river for a quarter of a mile ahead as though it were in broad daylight. The effect was magical. The war-whoops instantly ceased or turned to cries of dismay, while the savages themselves could be seen flying in terror, or standing as if rooted to the spot by sheer amazement.

To add to their confusion, Pedro was directed to blow off steam, while I seized the opportunity to get up a fresh case of ammunition from the locker. For a minute or two the escaping steam prevented us from hearing anything else. When, however, it was shut off again our ears were assailed by a noise as totally different as it was loud and unexpected. At first we thought it was the savages who were treating us to a novel kind of objurgation, though there was not one to be seen.

'Hi, Pedro!' cried Dick. 'What on earth's the meaning of this infernal din?'

'*Los monos*—monkeys, sah!' replied the Mestizo. 'Dey not like deir sleep disturb by all de light an' fuss. Gosh!' he continued, grinning more broadly than ever at his own facetiousness, 'dey hab *good cause* ob complaint, too.'

'I quite agree with you, my good fellow,' I said; 'that exhaust steam is enough to split one's head open!'

'It's been too much for the Tapuyas at all events,' observed Dick. 'They've "vamoosed," as the Yankees say, without leaving their address behind them.'

And it really seemed as if such was the case; hence our high spirits. As it turned out, however, our rejoicing was somewhat premature.

'Slow her—slow her; half-speed!' shouted the skipper a few minutes later.

We were approaching a rather sharp bend in the river, and it was necessary to proceed very cautiously to avoid fouling one or other of the banks. At length, however, we accomplished the task safely, and entered upon what appeared to be another long, straight reach of dark water. To our surprise, the monkeys had almost ceased their discordant cries and screams, and only gave vent to their annoyance by a sort of intermittent and half-suppressed chattering.

'Hurrah! we shall have a little peace now, I hope,' said Dick exultantly. 'Chuco was right about our engine being swifter than their paddles.'

'And more noisy than their throats,' I struck in gaily.

But the words were scarcely uttered ere the whistle and clatter of hundreds of arrows mingled with Chuco's loud cry:

'Los Indios! los Indios!'

We were so completely taken by surprise that it was a marvel some of us were not killed. As it was, Dick was slightly wounded in the neck, and I had an arrow through my hat and another through the sleeve of my Norfolk jacket.

'Down, down!' we exclaimed, falling prone upon hands and knees, for I had been standing carelessly

upon the gun-platform, and Dick neglecting to keep well within the shelter of the wheel-house.

‘That comes of shouting before one is out of the wood!’ observed my unlucky comrade, holding his handkerchief to his neck to stop the bleeding.

‘Hold on a minute and let me suck the wound for you,’ I said. ‘Who knows but that the arrow may have been poisoned?’ And suiting the action to the word, I applied my lips and drew whatever venom there might be into my mouth and spat it overboard. Then I tied Dick’s handkerchief over the place.

‘Thanks, old chap,’ was all he had time to say ere our guide’s voice sang out some warning or other.

All we could catch above the incessant hail of arrows against the guard-screen and the yells of the savages was, ‘*Tente! tente!*’

‘What is he saying?’ I inquired of Pedro, whose head appeared at intervals, like a jack-in-the-box, gazing up from his engine-room door.

But there was no need to have put the question; Pedro had already heard the Indian’s cry, and was about to echo the refrain for our information.

‘*Tente!*’ he began; and then, recollecting himself, he continued in English, ‘Hold! stop! We are passing de riber—de riber from de south!’

‘What! the river we were to turn into?’ cried Dick in tones of consternation. ‘Then stop her; turn off steam. Stop her, I say!’

Pedro’s head disappeared like a flash. The engine ceased working for a moment, and then followed the orders:

‘Switch on the stern light! Half-speed astern!’

Meanwhile I had dropped one of the peep-hole slides

and was peering out to larboard. As the powerful electric rays shot out and illumined the scene they revealed a startling sight. There, truly enough, was the mouth of the tributary we wished to ascend, but there also was a formidable obstacle to our advance. A huge tree, one of the forest giants, had fallen across the water a little way from the entrance, partially blocking it. But that was not all. Beyond the tree could be discerned a large fleet of war-canoes, all fully manned by well-armed warriors.

CHAPTER XV.

THE VAMPIRE.



T was now my turn to cry 'Hold!' and that I did lustily.

'What's the matter?' shouted Dick. 'We must back her until we are opposite the mouth, and then turn sharp up.'

From his position at the wheel he could not see well to port when backing the vessel.

'No; for heaven's sake stop her!' I cried. 'There's an ambuscade. Look! look!' And darting across, I seized the helm myself with one hand, and with the other half-pushed him towards the loophole.

'Yes, I see,' was all he uttered, his keen vision taking in the situation at a glance; and rushing back to his post, he shouted the necessary orders for resuming our former course, ending with 'Full speed ahead!'

Even at that critical moment I could not help thinking that Dick Stavely had missed his proper vocation. He knew how to handle a boat at all events; and his ability stood us in good stead on this occasion as on many others. A few moments' delay or confusion might have been fatal; for the instant the *Argo*

became almost stationary, ere it could resume the onward journey up the main river, the war-canoes shot out from their ambush and bore down upon us. Propelled by the powerful arms of the paddlers, and favoured by the current, they all but reached us before we could get up speed.

‘Fire! Why don’t you fire?’ cried Dick, whose fighting blood was up.

But I was not quite such an adept at handling the Maxim as Mac would have been; and ere I could lower the guard-screen at the stern, so as to obtain a clear line of fire and train the weapon in the required direction, the opportunity had passed.

For a moment or two things had an ugly look, for one of the canoes got so close that its occupants endeavoured to board us. The lowered guard-screen presented a tempting opening at the stern, and the savages pulled for it with all their might. Luckily, however, the stream was now against them, and the wash from our propeller, as we at last forged swiftly ahead, also combined to thwart their efforts. Perceiving that the game was up, the paddlers dropped their blades, and springing to their feet, lance in hand, hurled the weapons at the launch. Most of them fell short, or only struck the vessel’s stern; but one, flying high, smashed the electric lamp and threw all behind us into Stygian darkness.

Our exclamations of annoyance at this misfortune were drowned in the exultant yells of the savages. But their jubilation quickly subsided when they found that the extinction of the wonderful lamp caused us no perceptible injury, and did not in the least retard our flight. I shudder to think what might have been our

fate if it had been the forward search-light instead of the rear one which had been destroyed. On a strange river, and in the dark, we should quickly have been at the mercy of our pursuers, whose eyes were almost like cats', and who knew every bend and turn of the course.

'My goodness! but it might have been worse, old chap,' exclaimed the skipper, as this view of the situation dawned upon him while guiding our little steamer onward.

But another thought was exercising my mind at that moment, and made me silent—'Where were we speeding to?'

Chuco was at his post in the bows, keeping a vigilant lookout ahead, but it was doubtful whether he knew any better than did we whither we were going. For the present, however, the crisis had passed. The yells of the Tapuyas were already growing faint in the distance, and we were able to converse without shouting.

'I should think we might safely slacken speed,' I said. 'We have distanced our pursuers, and ought to try and find out where really we are going.'

'Right, old fellow,' responded Dick; 'just fetch the Indian here.—Hi, Pedro!' he continued, raising his voice; 'steady—slow down a bit—half-speed!'

The orders were obeyed, and then the Mestizo was requisitioned as interpreter.

'Ask him,' said Dick, with an inclination of his head towards the Indian, 'where we are steering to now.'

Pedro turned the question into the Quichua tongue, while we two Englishmen watched our guide's face with no little anxiety. It gave no sign, however, beyond the moving of the lips as he answered in the

same language. We could not wait in silence for Pedro to interpret the reply, but each cried out:

‘What does he say?’

‘Him say straight for de Cordilleras, ob course.’

‘Yes, yes; but does he know the river—is it safe?’ asked Dick impatiently.

Pedro turned to the Indian, and they conversed together for several minutes ere he obtained a reply.

‘Chuco say de riber am same as dis, only narrower and swifter, all de way to de foot ob de mountains,’ said Pedro at length.

‘And then?’

‘And den it stop short. ‘Cause why? De riber come tumbling ober de cliffs, straight from de Ceja.’

‘The Ceja! What is that?’ asked Dick wonderingly.

‘De hebben beyond dis land ob woe, sah,’ answered the Mestizo, with a self-satisfied grin at his own facetiousness.

Dick laughed, but in a dubious sort of way, as if uncertain whether or no the much-indulged slavey were poking fun at him.

‘Ah! doubtless he means “La Ceja de la Montaña,”’ I said, coming to the rescue. ‘I’ve been reading about that.’

‘And, pray, what does that mean?’ asked Stavely rather acrimoniously, for the strain on the nerves, occasioned by the fatigues and anxieties of the past few days, was beginning to tell even upon him.

‘Literally, I believe, “the brow of the mountain,” though some translate it “the brow of the forest.” It signifies the richly-wooded slopes three to four thousand feet up the mountains, and is described as a veritable earthly paradise.’

‘Well, my word! I wish we were there,’ responded Dick, brightening up.

‘Yes; magnificent as these forests are, there’s no temptation to linger in them,’ I said; ‘for, to put it mildly, the inhabitants are not prepossessing either in their manners or appearance.’

‘They’re a set of incarnate fiends, if that’s what you mean,’ was the skipper’s blunt comment; and turning to the two coloured men, he ordered them back to their respective posts.

A minute later we were steaming away, almost as fast as before, up the dark waterway. My post at the gun having become a sinecure for the present, I employed myself in preparing coffee and handing it round to those on duty along with biscuit and cheese. We were anxious to put as much of the forest country behind us as possible ere daylight returned.

The current, however, was becoming stronger almost every mile, showing that we were gradually ascending as we approached the mountains; and by morning our best speed was only five miles an hour. We were further delayed by having to land and cut wood for the engine fire. When this work was accomplished we were all so completely worn out that it was decided to steam out into mid-stream and cast anchor until we had obtained at least a couple of hours’ sleep.

Day was on the point of breaking when, after extinguishing all lights, Dick, Pedro, and myself lay down in our clothes just as we were, while Chuco took the first watch. In an hour’s time he was to be relieved by the Mestizo, and then Dick and I were to follow on. It seemed as though I had scarcely dropped into a refreshing sleep, and the tardy daylight had not

yet penetrated the forest depths, when I was suddenly awakened by my comrade's voice crying:

'Help! Murder!'

I was wide awake in a moment, and springing to my feet, I saw Stavely, who was already on his, in the act of pointing his revolver at a dark figure, which luckily I at once recognised as that of our Indian guide.

'Hold!' I shouted; 'it's Chuco. Don't fire!'

Dick dropped the muzzle of his revolver in a moment, but even as he did so the weapon was discharged through sheer nervousness, the bullet tearing a hole in the deck.

Chuco, who was standing scarcely a couple of yards off, with both hands raised in a deprecating attitude, was at first too scared to speak. But the shot roused Pedro, who was away in his favourite retreat near the engine.

'Gosh! what am all de fuss about?' he exclaimed, coming up the steps with one bound.

'That fellow struck me in my sleep. Seize the traitor!' cried Stavely excitedly.

The Mestizo rushed forward to execute the order, but Chuco slipped deftly aside. The action seemed to restore his power of speech, and he cried out some words in his native tongue.

'*He! realmente!*' responded Pedro, stopping short. '*Estrizo-vampiro!*' he went on in Spanish; and then, turning to us with a loud guffaw, he cried, 'Why, sahs, dis watchful Injun save de capitan's life mos' likely.'

'How so?'

'What do you mean?'

‘De vampire debil try to suck him blood!’ he explained.

‘What! a vampire—a *vampire*!’ exclaimed Dick, in tones of horror. ‘I thought such things were a myth.’

‘No; dey am a big bat, sah—*murci-egalo largo*.’

‘It is “mercy on us” and no mistake,” responded the skipper, in his turn, missing the right meaning. ‘But who’s going to believe such a yarn as this?’ he added, his doubts beginning to rise as his nerves recovered their equilibrium.

‘Dis ain’t no yarn, sah,’ replied the indignant Pedro. ‘What for you tink de Pampa del Sacramento and all de oder plains along dese parts no stocked wid cattle?’

Stavely did not answer. He was feeling at the wound in his neck, for he felt blood trickling from it down his shoulders. The discovery made him grow pale, for it seemed to confirm the horrible assertions of the two coloured men.

‘Why, de vampire-bat, ob course,’ continued Pedro. ‘Him suck de life-blood all away in de night.’

‘Do you really mean to say that they will attack men as well as animals?’ I asked.

‘Yes, sah; but only sometimes, sah—when dey bery hungry, an’ de pore man bery tired or wounded.’

‘Oh, the brutes! I can never sleep again in the open,’ said Dick.

‘Nor I. Let us go into the cabin,’ I suggested.

And this we did as soon as we had heard Chuco’s detailed explanation as interpreted by Pedro. It appeared that soon after we had fallen asleep—which was directly we lay down—the Indian noticed a large bat flitting to and fro over the vessel. Presently he missed it, and some instinct induced him to step lightly

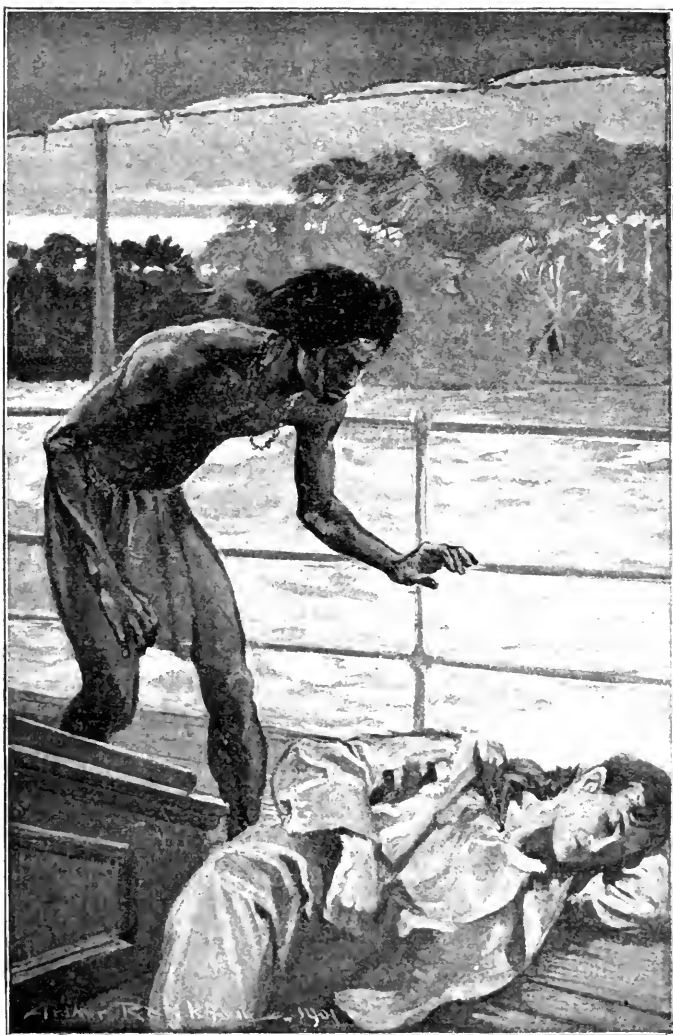
over to where the white men were sleeping. To his horror, he saw that the bat had fastened itself on to Stavely's neck, and was apparently sucking at the wound. He instantly tried to seize it, but the vampire eluded him, striking the sleeping man in the face with one of its wings as it rose into the air; the result being that Stavely, suddenly awakened by the blow, mistook his preserver for a traitorous assailant, and but for my prompt intervention he would doubtless have shot the unfortunate Indian.

Save the occasional howl of a wild beast, and the customary chattering and screaming of monkeys and parrots as daylight broke, nothing further disturbed our much-needed repose; and when, about eight o'clock, we 'up anchor' and continued our journey, there was still no sign of the enemy.

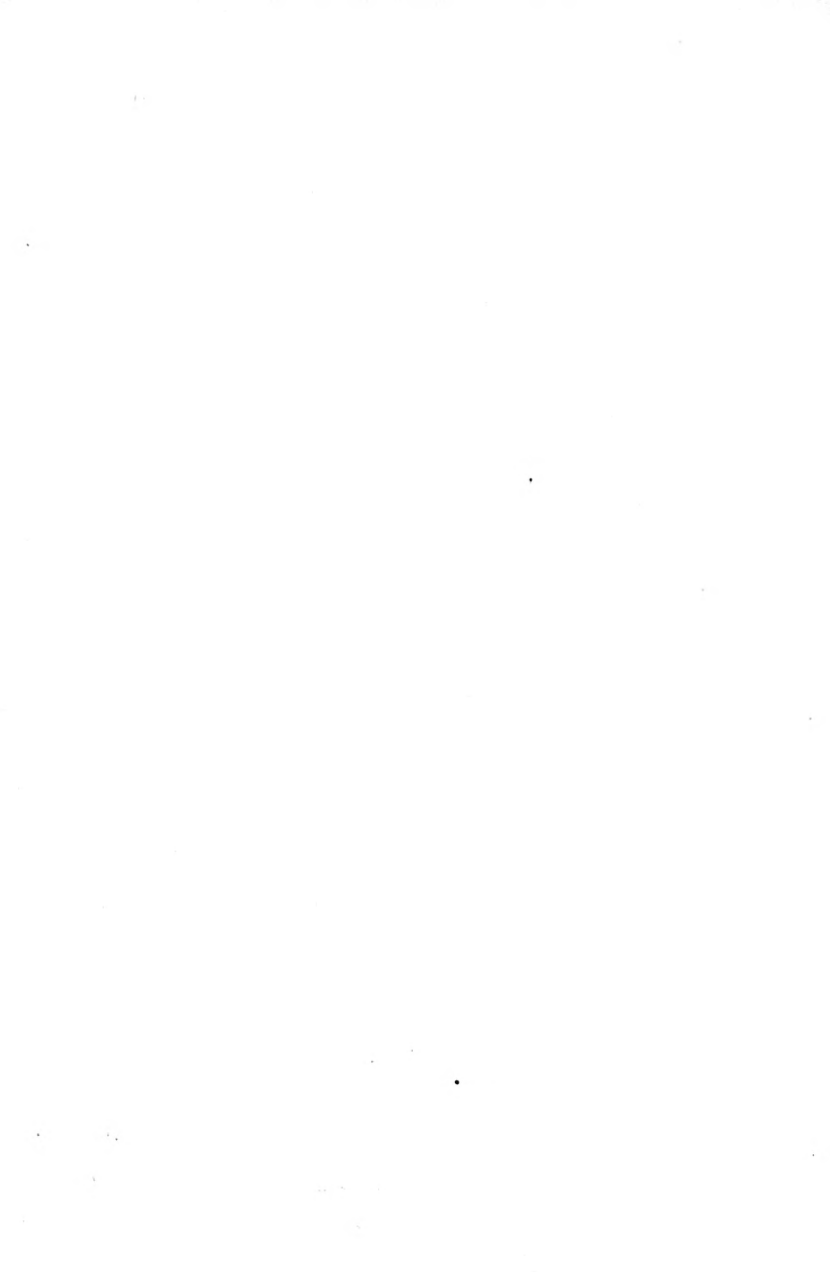
After discussing the pros and cons, it was decided to abandon our first idea of ascending the tributary Chuco had pointed out, as to do so we should have to retrace our course and again run the gauntlet of the savages. Chuco assured us that there was a trail leading down from the Ceja to the navigable head of the Pachitea, at the foot of the waterfall which he had already described; and he said that by that means we could reach the more healthy elevated tract, and journey southward along that until we struck the mountain region beyond which lay the high tableland of Incala.

Accordingly we steamed steadily westward all that day, anchoring for the night in mid-stream within sound of a waterfall. On the following morning we resumed our journey, making but slow progress against a strong current.

'Stop her—back her!' suddenly shouted the skipper,



To his horror, he saw that the bat had fastened itself on to Stavely's neck, and was apparently sucking at the wound.



on a warning cry from Chuco, about an hour after starting; and looking ahead, we descried what seemed to be a cataract.

There was no immediate cause for alarm, however, so we proceeded at half-speed.

‘Steady!’ cried Dick as we approached the whirling, foaming water.

But presently the Indian, who was standing in the bows, waved his hands as a signal to us that all was right and we could go on.

‘Go ahead—full speed!’ shouted Dick, but his voice was drowned in the noise of the waterfall.

‘Full speed’ seemed a reckless order, but such was the force of the current that it only sufficed to keep us advancing very slowly. Following Chuco’s further directions, we steamed close along the right bank of the river, where we found the current less overpowering. It then became evident to us that the waterfall was not on the river we were navigating, but was at its junction with a tributary flowing from the north. This affluent poured its waters into the Pachitea, over a series of falls from the high ground on the left.

‘My goodness! I was beginning to think old Chuco was leading us to destruction,’ exclaimed the skipper, with a sigh of relief, as we passed into the smoother water beyond.

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘it seemed foolhardy to approach the cataract so close.’

‘I thought at first it was the *Ultima Thule* at the foot of the Ceja which we had reached, but of course’——

‘Hillo!’ I cried, interrupting my comrade’s remark. ‘What have we here?’

On the farther side of the river, standing out boldly above the fall, was a high rock crowned with unmistakable ruins as of some ancient fortalice.

‘Wonderful!’ exclaimed Dick as, looking up, he saw the unexpected evidences of some ancient civilisation frowning down upon us from that commanding situation.

‘A relic of the old Inca régime, I’ve not the slightest doubt,’ I said.

‘Ay; one of their outposts against the irredeemable barbarism of the lowlands,’ he agreed.

It was a grand sight, with the heavily wooded slopes of the adjacent mountains for a background, and farther away still the snow-clad summits of the lofty Cordilleras of the Andes.

‘My goodness! but Nature works on a grand scale in this part of the world,’ ejaculated Dick, fairly fascinated by the glorious scene.

‘That’s been the uppermost thought in my mind for a long time,’ I said. ‘But take care, or we shall be fouling some of those rocks,’ I added, seeing that we were just entering a narrow kind of gorge, where the river flowed between almost perpendicular walls of granite, with an occasional boulder of enormous size protruding above the hurrying waters.

From this point onwards the country was quite different from that we had previously passed through. The river wound between high wooded hills and bare rocky eminences, until at last we came in sight of the lofty falls which Chueo had told us of, and which peremptorily barred our farther progress—by water at least.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BROW OF THE FOREST.



H, what a magnificent fall!' exclaimed Dick.

'Glorious!' said I. 'It puts the finishing touch to Nature's inimitable handiwork.'

'Ay, and to our inimitable river-trip too, unfortunately,' was the skipper's disconsolate response. He shrank from the notion of leaving his beloved launch, which he had come to regard almost as his own 'right little, tight little craft.'

'Never mind,' said I. 'She couldn't have a lovelier resting-place.'

'No; but she might have a safer one. I hate the thought of those fiendish Tapuyas getting hold of her.'

'They won't, I hope, for we shall want her again unless we're destined to leave our bones in these vast solitudes.'

'Which Heaven forfend!' responded Dick fervently.

A minute later Chuco, who was on the lookout forward, gave a shout, and pointed excitedly towards the left bank.

‘See, there is a gap in the rocks!’ I cried. ‘That must be the landing-place Chuco spoke about.’

‘Yes, my word! He’s beckoning me to steer for it,’ said Dick, shifting the helm accordingly.

Gradually slackening speed as we neared the spot, we at length drew close into a natural landing-stage of solid rock. We had to keep the engine going to prevent the current from carrying us back down the gorge, while Pedro and the Indian sprang ashore with a stout rope and made it fast to a piece of rock.

This accomplished, we consulted together as to what was best to be done with the launch, and finally it was decided to steam slowly up-stream in search of a suitable berth. The two coloured men, after releasing the hawser, scrambled along the high bank, while Dick and I worked the launch. We had not proceeded in this way more than a quarter of a mile when Dick sang out to me to slacken speed.

‘My word!’ he cried a moment later, ‘here’s the very spot we’re looking for.’

A hurried glance showed me that we were entering a narrow but lofty cavern in the cliff.

‘Stop her! Reverse the engine!’ shouted Dick.

And quickly as I obeyed the orders, I felt the little vessel strike the rock ere I could quite bring her to a standstill.

‘All right—no harm done!’ cried Dick exultantly, and his voice had a peculiar ring in the confined space we were in.

Springing on deck, I found that the cavern was really more of the nature of a crevice in the granite wall. Its sides sloped inwards towards the top like a house roof, but they did not quite meet. About

twenty feet above our heads daylight struggled through the creepers and evergreens which almost closed the narrow summit of the crevasse, the latter ending in a point some fifty feet beyond the *Argo's* prow.

'What luck! This might have been made purposely for us,' I cried.

'Yes, yes; the very thing—the very thing!'

The skipper was in an ecstasy of delight at having found so snug and safe a berth for his beloved *Argo*.

'See!' he continued, pointing over the stern; 'that huge boulder opposite the entrance effectually screens us from the river and the bank beyond. No villainous Tapuya is likely to spy our little craft in here.'

'No; but how are we to get on shore, old man?'

'Pooh! That's simple enough,' answered Dick. 'Just lend a hand with this anchor; I want to drop it over the bows so as to keep her steady.'

When we had done this, Dick told me to give a couple of toots with the steam-whistle, just to let the two men ashore know where we were. A few minutes later a head was thrust between the creepers overhead, and an unmistakable voice called down to us:

'Ho, sahs! where in de world am you got to?' And then, the Mestizo's eyes becoming gradually accustomed to the comparative darkness of the cavern, he added, with a sudden access of spirits:

'Gosh! dere am de *Argo* too! Wal done, sahs! Dis am a grand harbour underground!'

'Yes, I think we've chanced upon a snug berth for the boat,' acquiesced Dick; 'but we mustn't delay, or some of those infernal savages may come up before we can clear out. Tell Chuco to keep a sharp look-

out, while you let down that cord you've got, and haul up these guns and things.'

'Right, sah!' was the prompt response; and in a few minutes Pedro had unwound the rope from his waist, and was hauling up the various articles we considered needful for the perilous march before us.

'It's no use burdening ourselves with more than is absolutely necessary,' I said, as Dick was proceeding to send up his heavy smooth-bore and several cases of ammunition. 'We shall find walking and climbing quite hard work enough, even in light marching order, under this semi-tropical sun.'

'Right you are, old chap!' was Dick's answer as he carried the favourite weapon back to his locker.

Finally we restricted ourselves to a Winchester repeating rifle apiece, a couple of Colt's revolvers, a hunting-knife, a good hatchet, a light blanket, and of course our cartridge-belts. To the men were entrusted axes and knives, two stout canvas bags filled with provisions, a coil of light rope each, and a couple of india-rubber water-bottles. Before allowing ourselves to be hauled up after the 'baggage,' we made all tight on the steamer, and further secured her by extemporised anchors from either side of the stern.

'Now,' said Dick, glancing over the opening between the walls of the cavern, 'we'll just interlace some of the straggling creepers across the hole we've made in the natural roof, and then I'll defy even a Tapuya to spy our little *Argo* below.'

Half-an-hour later found us resting, hot and breathless, on a narrow sort of terrace some five hundred feet above the river. This we supposed to be the old

Inca military road leading to the ancient fortalice which we had seen earlier in the day. It was so overgrown with trees, shrubs, and climbing plants that it was only with the greatest difficulty, and the constant aid of axe or hatchet, that we could force our way along it. The trail Chuco pointed out crossed this terrace, and appeared to run in too northerly a direction to be of further use to us; so, after gaining the ancient Inca highway, we decided to work our way along it, as it led by an easy gradient up the mountain in the direction we wished to go.

‘My goodness! but this is tough work,’ exclaimed Dick, wiping the perspiration from his face.

‘Yes,’ I responded; ‘but if Chuco is correct this road—save the mark!—will eventually land us in the magnificent region they call the Ceja de la Montaña.’

‘All that is left of us!’ interpolated Dick, rather lugubriously for him. ‘I’m perspiring at every pore.’

‘Pooh!’ I said. ‘It’ll only relieve us of the superfluous fat we have put on since leaving England. We’ve had too little exercise, cramped up in that tiny launch.’

Before Dick could reply to my sally there was a shout of alarm from Chuco, who was scouting a little in advance; and the next moment he came hurrying back, looking rather scared and gesticulating excitedly.

‘What is it—are the savages upon us?’ we cried, springing to our feet and clutching our rifles.

Pedro questioned the Indian in his own language, and then turning to us, said:

‘It’s a big serpent, sah—a boa!’

'What! a boa-constrictor?' asked Dick.

'Yas, sah, a boa-'strictor!'

'Otherwise a python,' I suggested, looking to the magazine of my rifle to see that it was filled and in working order.

Dick followed my example, and then we all followed Chuco, who led the way very cautiously. The undergrowth being less tangled at this spot, we wound our way with comparative ease between the trunks of the tall trees. Suddenly Chuco stopped and held up his hand as a signal to us to halt; then, dropping on to his hands and knees, he advanced a few paces farther, and cautiously pushed aside some luxuriant creepers. I was not far behind, and when he beckoned us to come on I crept up beside him, rifle in hand. Peering through the tiny gap in the dense foliage, I saw a small open glade. To the right of the glade stood an immense mahogany-tree, and from its lower branches depended the huge tail of a python! Instinctively I raised the Winchester to my shoulder.

'Wait, sah! Don't fire till you see him head,' whispered Pedro, who had closed up behind me.

I had no intention of doing otherwise, and giving a nod to reassure the Mestizo, I looked hard into the tree to discover the reptile's head.

Meanwhile Dick, whose sporting instincts had come to the fore, was endeavouring to creep round to the right of the glade.

'Ugh!' exclaimed the Indian, pointing with his finger. And almost simultaneously Pedro ejaculated:

'Gosh, sah! Dere he am!'

At the same moment there was a loud report from Dick's rifle, followed by a great commotion amongst

the branches of the mahogany. I could see some dark object apparently gliding down the trunk of the tree; but being unable to distinguish head from tail, I withheld my fire. It was well I did so, for, quick as lightning, the boa suddenly shot forth its terrible head, and, with eyes all ablaze, peered out from beneath the branches as though looking for the enemy who had fired at and evidently wounded it. I had raised my rifle to my shoulder when Chuco made his exclamation; but for a moment I was so paralysed with horror at seeing the deadly fangs within a few feet of me that I could not hold the weapon steady.

Stavely was even in worse straits. The python appeared instinctively to know that it was he who had wounded it, and the moment it caught sight of him it concentrated its gaze upon him. His rifle was at his shoulder, but as he glanced along the sights his eyes were caught and fixed by those of the serpent, and he lost all power of action. He could neither fire the weapon nor withdraw his gaze from that of the horrid monster before him. And the longer he looked the more helpless and fascinated he became; until at length he felt as if he must rush forward to meet the fate which seemed in store for him.

Luckily for my chum, however, I grew calm and collected as I realised his imminent danger. I could see him kneeling like myself on one knee, in the attitude of taking aim, but he appeared as though turned to stone, so colourless was his face and so rigid his form and expression. The worst of it was, the boa was already moving its head backwards and forwards as though preparing to strike. It thus presented a

very uncertain mark, especially for a rifle. But an involuntary groan from its helpless victim aroused me to the necessity for instant action. He was actually moving towards the deadly serpent, which was now poisoning its head for the fatal stroke.

Chuco and the Mestizo seemed equally spell-bound with their hapless leader, and stood as if rooted to the ground. The python was not ten feet from the muzzle of my gun, and its deadly fangs seemed almost to touch it as I glanced my eye along the barrel. Luckily my nerves had become perfectly steady, and seizing the moment that the serpent's head was motionless, I pulled the trigger. As the report rang out I saw the cruel head drop, and knew that my aim had been true.

There was a loud shout from Pedro and a triumphant yell from the guide as both sprang forward, knife in hand, to complete the bullet's work. But there was no necessity for their attentions. The ball had entered one ear and gone out through the other, piercing the creature's brain, and the huge carcass gradually relaxed its grip of the tree, and after sundry writhings fell heavily to the ground.

Meanwhile I sprang across the corner of the glade to Dick's assistance. His rifle had slipped from his grasp, and he was leaning, dazed and limp, against the underwood on the edge of the opening. After the terrible ordeal through which he had passed, the sudden revulsion of feeling on finding himself safe was almost too much for him.

'Here, old chap, take a pull at this,' I said, handing him my flask, which fortunately I had filled with a powerful cordial before quitting the *Argo*.

‘Thanks, old fellow; you wiped my eye that time and no mistake!’ he said, chagrin at his own indifferent marksmanship overmastering for the moment all other considerations under the revivifying effects of the potent draught. That was Stavely all over—more concerned for his reputation as a sportsman than for anything else in the world, even his life.

‘And a jolly good thing for you I was able to do it!’ I said, feeling rather piqued at so cool a response to my efforts.

The tone of my voice and the sight of the boa lying dead at his feet recalled Dick to a truer sense of the situation.

‘Good gracious!’ he stammered, ‘what am I talking about? Why, you’ve saved my life, Phil!’ and seizing me by the hand, he wrung it vigorously, while gazing first at me and then at the terrible carcass before him.

After measuring the dead python, which proved to be twenty-four feet long, and thirty inches in girth at the thickest part of the body, we resumed our march. Nightfall found us still struggling through the dense underbrush, and we were compelled to bivouac as best we could in its dank and dismal surroundings. We durst not light a fire for fear of bringing some of the fierce Tapuyas down upon us; so we surrounded ourselves with a strong fence of carascos to keep off any prowling beast of prey, and after eating a good supper of preserved meat and biscuits, lay down to rest. Fatigued as we were, we soon fell asleep, and did not awake until the sun was high in the heavens. Then we recommenced our arduous climb. Nothing of interest occurred until towards evening, when

suddenly we emerged on a comparatively open plateau, commanding a magnificent panorama.


‘Hurrah! Here’s the Ceja at last!’ exclaimed Dick joyously.

‘La Ceja de la Montaña!’ shouted Pedro lustily; while the guide signified his delight by an expressive ‘Ugh!’

As for myself, I stood fairly enraptured by the glorious scene which broke upon my vision.

CHAPTER XVII.

PUMAS AND PARADISE.

‘OULD anything be more charming?’ cried Dick, who, like myself, was fairly carried away by the exquisite beauty of the scene. ‘Did you ever see such a vast expanse of forest, or such endless chains of mountains?’

In truth the view was one of indescribable beauty and incomparable grandeur. We stood upon a natural terrace carpeted with flowers of the most brilliant hue, and edged by trees of every shade of green; while beneath us was a perfect ocean of foliage, and to north and south extended range over range of lofty, snow-peaked mountains. Westward, the ground rose and fell in gentle undulations for miles before it again mounted steeply upwards towards the distant Cordilleras.

As nearly as we could tell by Dick’s aneroid, we had climbed some two thousand feet from the Pachitea, which we reckoned to be about one thousand five hundred feet above sea-level at the spot we had berthed our launch; our calculation, therefore, making the Ceja some three thousand five hundred feet

above sea-level. We noticed a marvellous difference in the air of this elevated tract; it was deliciously light and exhilarating after the close, muggy heat of the low-lying region through which we had so long journeyed.

As the sun set behind the towering peaks of the Andes, diffusing a crimson glow over the mighty panorama, we could scarcely contain ourselves. Indeed Dick suddenly burst out into a loud whoop of delight, startling Chuco and the Mestizo not a little, for they thought the Tapuyas were upon us. Then, having relieved our feelings by a hearty laugh, we all set to work to form our camp for the night.

On the following day we struck out in a south-westerly direction, under Chuco's guidance, our object being to get round a shoulder of the mountains on to a higher plateau beyond. As we journeyed over the beautiful upland we were more than ever impressed by its many advantages. The forest was no longer continuous, but broken up into clumps and patches of varying size, with stretches of velvety grass and flowery turf between. It was like one vast, interminable park, intersected by broad rivers and sparkling brooks. The invigorating air, too, enabled us to step briskly along without sense of fatigue, and but for the healthy appetites engendered we should probably have marched forward until nightfall. As it was, however, we were constrained to make several halts in order to appease our hunger. Game of all kinds abounded, and we soon shot more than we could well carry, though at each halt we lighted fires and roasted and ate all we wanted.

'My word! this is a magnificent country,' exclaimed

Dick. 'If Mac were only with us I'd vote for pitching our camp here indefinitely.'

'We might do worse,' I acquiesced. 'But how about the treasure?'

'By George! I'd nearly forgotten it,' was the naïve response. 'The fact is,' continued Dick, 'we seem farther from it now than when we sailed from England. Then it appeared almost tangible. We were fairly embarked on our adventure, and you know the saying, "Well begun—half-done." Now, however, we seem lost, swallowed up in these vast solitudes, and Atahualpa's ransom a myth—or perhaps I should say a will-o'-the-wisp, luring us on to our undoing.'

'Seems to me you're in a low mood to-night, old chap. You forget that Unini as good as admitted the treasure existed.'

'Ay, but she also doubted our ability to reach it,' rejoined Dick; 'or, having reached it, to carry away any considerable quantity of it.'

'I hope Mac will be able to arrange that,' I replied. 'You must remember the girl's people owe us a big debt of gratitude for rescuing her as we did.'

'No doubt; but they may prefer to pay it in some easier way than by invading the territories of their most warlike neighbours.'

'Inveterate enemies, you mean — unmitigated savages, whose continual raids have at length culminated in the forcible seizure and abduction of the Inca's daughter! Depend upon it,' I added, 'they will be made to suffer for this outrage; and what is to prevent our attaching ourselves to the punitive expedition and taking advantage of'——

‘Look! look!’ exclaimed Dick, interrupting my speech, and pointing a little to the left of our line of march.

‘My gracious, how enchanting!’ I cried as, following the direction of his hand, I saw spread out below us a lovely valley, through which flowed a broad, winding river. Towards the lower end of the valley, the river expanded into a beautiful lake, dotted with islets. These and parts of the lake shore were clothed with graceful palms and tree-ferns, while hosts of various species of myrtle clustered under the rocks which fringed-in the valley, exhaling a delicious perfume through the air. Fully two-thirds of the vale was covered with luxuriant grass and wild oats, interspersed by clumps and patches of trees peculiar to this region, conspicuous amongst these being the cacao and the mahogany, the rosewood and the fustic.

But what interested and excited us most of all were the herds of deer and other game, especially guanaco and alpaca, which were to be seen feeding on the abundant pasturage.

‘My goodness! Did you ever see such a sight?’ cried Dick, in ecstasies of delight. ‘Surely these must be the happy hunting-grounds which the Red Indians believe await them in the future state!’

‘At all events it would be difficult to imagine anything more beautiful,’ I said, continuing to feast my eyes on the deep verdure of the woods, the vivid green of the natural and far-reaching meadows, and, last but not least, on the translucent waters of river, streams, and lake, all sparkling in the brilliant sunshine.

‘What do de massas tink now of de Ceja de la Montaña?’ asked Pedro, grinning with pride and satis-

faction, as he contemplated the undisguised delight of the Englishmen.

‘I think it’s the most charming region in the world,’ I replied emphatically.

‘Yes, Pedro,’ added Dick ; ‘and I think your countrymen are the most stupid race in existence not to have occupied such a magnificent possession long ago.’

‘My countrymen?’ queried the Mestizo, trying to look dignified, and evidently greatly offended. ‘You forget, sah, dat I am a Brazilian, and dat dis am Peru ! At least,’ he corrected himself, ‘all de Montaña am claimed by Peru, do’ dey are afraid to occupy but a very small part ob it.’

‘To be sure—how stupid I am !’ responded Stavely. ‘I remember your telling me, Phil,’ he went on, ‘that the Javari River was the boundary between Brazil and Peru, so that in reality we are at this moment in the very heart of the latter country.’

‘Right you are, old fellow,’ said I ; ‘though it’s very difficult to realise the fact. And I don’t see that the unenterprising Peruvians would have any great cause for complaint if some other Power should step in and take possession of this grand territory. It’s a shame to see it abandoned to savages.’

‘My word, it is!’ cried Dick. ‘I vote we annex it to ourselves. After running the gauntlet of those fierce Tapuyas, we surely could claim it as by right of conquest.’

‘But could we hold it, old chap? That is the question,’ I objected, laughing.

Pedro had quite recovered his usual good temper by this time, and appeared even more tickled than we ourselves were by our little conceit. His laugh was so

spontaneous and hearty that it excited our own risibility to the utmost, and for some minutes we fairly gave ourselves up to the indulgence.

We were rudely sobered. Chuco, never having seen this valley before, and fearing we might be getting too far south, had gone forward to reconnoitre. Suddenly we heard an agonised yell, followed by loud cries for help, and the angry growls of some wild beast or beasts. The sounds appeared to come from a thicket which fringed the base of the mound, and snatching up our weapons, which we had laid upon the ground beside us, we rushed off in that direction. It was evident that our guide was in desperate straits, and our only thought was to reach him as quickly as possible. Dick was very fleet of foot, and he plunged into the bushes a few feet in advance of me and Pedro.

‘Take care, sah!’ cried the latter. But the words were scarcely spoken before our ears were assailed by a fierce snarl, a rifle-shot, and a groan almost simultaneously.

The next moment I nearly fell over the prostrate form of my comrade as he lay in the grip of some tawny wild beast. Recovering myself by an effort, I levelled my rifle at the brute’s head and fired. I was so close that it was impossible to miss my aim, and the huge, lion-like creature dropped dead with a bullet through its brain. Removing the heavy paw which still lay across Dick’s chest, I helped him to his feet. He seemed more dazed and frightened than seriously hurt, the brute not having had time to do him much injury.

Meanwhile Pedro had hastened on to where, a few

yards off, the guide lay groaning beneath a similar denizen of the woods. This he despatched with one dexterous blow of his axe. Then, with an exclamation of mingled triumph and dismay, he called out:

‘Oh, Massa Berkley, come quick! De puma am kill poor Chuco!’

Greatly alarmed at these words, I rushed forward with my rifle at the ready. A dozen paces carried me into a little opening in the thicket, where a curious sight met my view. The partially consumed carcass of a vicuña lay upon the ground, and stretched beside it was the apparently lifeless body of the Indian, with the slaughtered puma lying across it and deluging it with blood. Bending over the two was Pedro. He was endeavouring to force apart the powerful jaws of the puma, whose fangs were buried in his comrade’s shoulder.

Taking in the situation at a glance, I hastened to the Mestizo’s assistance, and between us we soon freed the unfortunate guide from his terrible position. He had fainted from pain and loss of blood, but speedily recovered when water was poured over his face from one of our rubber bottles, and a draught of stimulant administered. Nevertheless, it was evident that he would not be well enough for some days to continue the journey.

‘This is a fine commentary on our annexation proposal,’ said Dick, examining Chuco’s wound—‘half our forces overthrown by a couple of sneaking pumas!’

‘What the French would style a regular *débâcle*,’ I assented. ‘But seriously,’ I added a moment later, ‘we shall have to pitch our camp here until Chuco

is sufficiently recovered. This ugly wound and the shock to the system will incapacitate him for some time, I expect. What do you say?’

By this time Dick had made a thorough diagnosis of our guide’s injuries, and was applying a temporary bandage.

‘You are quite right, Phil; we’ve got to halt, and so I propose we pitch our tent in the valley below. There’s no water up here. And we can construct a rough litter on which to carry down our patient.’

‘By all means,’ I assented; and sending Pedro back for one of the blankets, while I cut a couple of poles from the thicket, we soon were ready to start.

Dick, still feeling a little shaky himself, was deputed to lead the way down the slope; while Pedro, heavily laden with our impedimenta, helped me to carry the improvised litter with its helpless occupant. We were fortunate in striking an easy descent in the shape of a well-trodden deer-path. This wound in and out amongst overtopping rocks and bushes and clumps of fragrant myrtle and other shrubs and trees. Every now and again we caught lovely glimpses of the lake, or of other equally charming features of the valley, debouching at last upon the open meadows through a tall grove of papaws, or papaya, yucca, and chirimoya.

‘My goodness,’ cried Dick, ‘this is simply enchanting!’

‘Yes; I think we must have chanced upon the veritable Garden of Eden,’ I responded, standing, like my chum, in wondering bewilderment at the indescribable beauties which surrounded us.

‘Gosh, sahs! Me tink dis am *el paraíso de la Ceja*

—“de garden ob de world,”’ was Pedro’s excited dictum, his eyes rolling and sparkling with delight.

‘Well, it certainly is a paradise,’ I said; ‘and let us hope there are no serpents hidden within its beauteous precincts.’

‘No, my word! or skulking pumas either,’ cried Dick; then, glancing towards the litter which I and Pedro had deposited for a moment on the sward, he added, ‘But I’m forgetting my patient. Now we’ve reached the water I must dress his wounds properly.’

‘Shall we pitch our camp here, then?’ I said. ‘There are no signs of any savages.’

A feeble exclamation as of dissent came from the guide, who seemed to divine the purport of our conversation. Then we heard him say something in his own language to Pedro.

‘Chuco begs you to be careful, sahs,’ said the Mestizo. ‘Him certain sure de Tapuyas hunt us down.’

‘Umph! that’s cheerful,’ I said.

‘Very,’ responded Dick ruefully. ‘What shall we do?’

‘We must try and get to one of those islets,’ I answered, endeavouring to keep calm, as I measured the distance with my eye.

‘Ay; but how is it to be done without a boat?’ said Dick despondently. ‘We might swim to the nearest one ourselves, but how about Chuco and the baggage?’

‘We must try to make a raft,’ I said.

‘A raft! Bravo, Phil! Well thought of!’ exclaimed Dick, in very different tones. ‘That solves the difficulty. We passed a dead cinchona tree not a hundred

paces back,' he continued. 'Cut and split that into lengths, and then bind the sections with ropes, and the thing's done.'

'Come on, Pedro—bring your axe,' I cried, seizing the other myself, and hurrying back to the grove.

The tree was sufficiently decayed to split readily, and yet was very dry and light. In less than half-an-hour we had cut and carried sufficient logs to make a raft big enough and buoyant enough to transport our whole party to one of the islets. Dick, who was almost as good as a sailor at such work, lashed the logs together with pieces of cord, while Pedro and I returned to the grove once more for a couple of long poles.

'Now then, all aboard,' cried Dick the moment we had launched our clumsy craft. 'Wounded first. That's it,' he added as Pedro helped me to lift poor Chuco and his litter on board.

The baggage was handed in next. Then we took our proper places, Stavelay at the prow, as he called that end of the raft which was pointing offshore, and Pedro and myself on either side to pole the vessel along. The water was over six feet deep, and the bottom somewhat muddy, so that our progress was rather slow. We had scarcely gone half the distance to the nearest islet when suddenly we heard a portentous yell.

'Hist! What was that?'

'Good heavens!'

'Gosh!'

Such were the exclamations that burst from our lips as, with blanched faces, we glanced first at one another and then in the direction whence the sounds came.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CLOSE QUARTERS.



GLEAM of light caught our uplifted eyes. It was the glint of steel. Our worst fears were realised—the Tapuyas were upon us!

‘Push for your lives!’ cried Dick, unslinging his Winchester. ‘If we don’t gain the island before those wretches reach the bank we’re done for!’

The savages evidently had descried us from the edge of the plateau, and with a fierce yell of delight they plunged down the slope. We could see their dark forms scrambling over the rocks and disappearing in the clumps and patches of trees and shrubs growing below. For a few minutes they were lost to sight in the wood itself; then there was a sound as of hunted deer breaking through a coppice, and the Tapuyas burst upon the plain.

Meanwhile Pedro and I were poling for dear life, but it was a case of more haste less speed. If we pushed too hard our poles stuck fast in the tenacious mud, retarding instead of advancing us; and we found that we progressed most rapidly by means of light, quick shoves. The green, sappy poles, however, were

not easily handled, and the perspiration streamed down our faces with the tremendous exertion. But it was a case of life or death, and we never for an instant relaxed our efforts.

‘Bravo! we shall do it,’ exclaimed Dick, whose attention was divided between watching the enemy and looking out for a landing-place.

Glancing ahead, I saw that the islet was within a couple of lengths of us. It appeared to be very rocky, and scarcely a hundred yards in diameter. But what bothered me was, that the sides rose abruptly from the water, and I could see no place to land. Stavely seemed to grasp this fact at the same moment, for he shouted out in his confusion, ‘Port your helm! Hard a-port! Keep round the island, I mean. We cannot land on this side.’

His words were almost drowned in the yells of the Tapuyas as they reached the lake-side.

‘Heavens! They’re fitting their arrows to shoot!’ cried Dick, throwing up his rifle. ‘Pole away, lads, while I give them a few rounds.’

We were just rounding the island as the sharp *crack! crack!* of the Winchester rang out in the clear, dry air. Dick was not the man to miss such a mark at so short a distance, and yells of mingled pain and defiance attested the fact.

‘Down—throw yourselves down!’ he cried, himself setting the example.

In a moment we were prostrate on the logs; and only in the nick of time, for a heavy flight of arrows whistled over us as we lay.

‘Now for it!—before they’ve time to give us another dose!’ said Dick, springing to his feet.

Pedro and I were up almost as quickly as the skipper, and while he kept a sharp lookout for any sunken rocks, we shoved our hardest. The island was irregular in shape, somewhat like an ace of diamonds. At the extremity we were rounding it terminated in a kind of miniature cliff rising perpendicularly from the water to a height of about twelve feet. If, therefore, we succeeded in turning this point, we knew that we should be completely sheltered from the flights of arrows.

Unfortunately, however, the water proved to be so deep at this spot that our poles would not reach the bottom; consequently we could make no farther progress. It was maddening to be within a few yards of safety and yet unable to attain it. The Tapuyas, observing our dilemma, raised a perfect howl of delight, but luckily in their exultation they forgot for a moment to shoot. At this critical juncture an idea flashed through my mind, and seizing an axe, I cut my pole into halves. Giving one to Pedro, I ordered him to use it as a paddle, myself setting him the example with the other piece. Then slowly but surely the raft began to move once more.

‘Bravo! Well done!’ cried Dick, taking fresh courage from our action.

But we were not yet out of the wood, or rather the water, for no sooner did the savages perceive that we were slipping through their fingers than they changed the tone of their outcry, and raising their bows once more, prepared to give us another volley. At the same time about a score of the boldest jumped into the lake and began swimming towards us.

‘Down again—quick!’ shouted Stavely; and down

we all flung ourselves once more, while a hail of arrows flew past.

This volley was directed better than the first, and many of the missiles struck the baggage, which fortunately we had piled at the hinder end of the raft, thus forming some little protection to the wounded Indian and ourselves. So soon as the storm of arrows ceased, we sprang up and resumed our paddling. But some of the Tapuyas had reserved their fire, and Pedro received a nasty wound on the hip, while I narrowly escaped one on the head, the arrow actually striking off my pith helmet and tearing a hole through the rim. It was neck or nothing, however, with us now, and both Pedro and myself stuck steadily to our paddling, while Dick endeavoured to pick off some of the swimmers with his rifle.

‘See! they’re trying to forestall us,’ cried Dick excitedly. ‘They’re making for the island;’ and taking careful aim, he fired again.

‘There’s one who’ll never reach it, at all events,’ I said, as the foremost savage threw up his arms and disappeared.

A moment later we rounded the little headland and were secure from the bowmen on shore. Our anxiety now was lest the swimmers should succeed in gaining the islet before us—their object evidently being to do so—and then from that coign of vantage, and the cover it would afford, oppose our landing and shoot us at their leisure. We should be an easy target in our exposed and clumsy craft. It may therefore be imagined with what eagerness we looked for any place where we could scramble ashore.

‘Here we are; paddle her in here!’ exclaimed Dick, pointing to a tiny inlet only a few lengths away.

‘Yes, that looks practicable,’ I acquiesced, handling my piece of pole to some purpose, and encouraging the Mestizo.

Meanwhile Dick busied himself in recharging the magazine of his rifle; and by the time this was accomplished we had entered the little cove. It was scarcely more than twice the width of our raft, and within a couple of lengths of the entrance the trees and bushes growing on either side met overhead. Into this leafy harbour we paddled as far as we could get. Then, making the raft fast to a tree-root, we held a hurried consultation as to what was best to be done with the wounded men, for Pedro’s hip was becoming very stiff and swollen.

‘They had better remain here on the raft until we’ve driven off the savages,’ said Dick, preparing to spring up the bank, which sloped steeply to the water. ‘They’ll be completely hidden from sight by these bushes.’

‘By all means,’ I agreed. ‘Pedro, you’ll look after the Indian and yourself till we return?’ I said, turning to the Mestizo.

‘Yas, sah—sartin sure, sah,’ came the prompt reply as, seizing my Winchester, I followed my comrade up the slope.

Threading our way between trees and rocks and clumps of bushes or flowering shrubs, we soon reached the opposite side of the little islet.

‘Good gracious! Do you see them?’ exclaimed Dick, after a rapid survey of the lake. ‘They’re turning the other end of the island!’

‘Then forrard on,’ I cried, becoming quite excited, ‘or they’ll be on shore before we can stop them! Depend upon it, they know of a landing-place in that direction.’

Before I had finished speaking we both were off again as fast as we could run. The ground, though rocky, was freer from obstruction in this part, and we fairly raced one another to the point for which the swimmers appeared to be making. It was easy to see why they had made no attempt to land sooner—the rocks fell perpendicularly to the water.

We were not long in traversing the short distance across the islet, but a large rock obstructed our view and prevented us from seeing our enemies as we neared the northern shore.

‘Keep to your left!’ cried Dick.

I was a few paces in advance, and following my comrade’s direction, I took to that side of the rock.

On turning its shoulder, I charged full into a half-naked savage coming from the opposite direction. The impact sent the savage backwards down the slope, and I barely saved myself from falling over him. It was lucky I kept my feet, for the whole band of Tapuyas were close behind their leader, and doubtless they would have speared me out of hand.

As it was, I managed to pull myself together and spring behind the rock before they could recover from their astonishment at the unlooked-for collision.

‘Look out, Dick!’ I shouted as my comrade came tearing after me.

The warning was just in time to prevent his running on to the levelled spears of the Tapuyas. With a startled cry, he checked himself and jumped to my

side, when we both drew our revolvers as being the best weapons for such close quarters. From where we knelt, behind a shoulder of the rock, we could see the place where the Tapuyas had landed. There was a narrow opening in the cliffs, and a gently sloping path to the water's edge. It was tantalising to observe that such a contracted approach could easily have been held against any numbers had we arrived only a few moments sooner; whereas now we must defend ourselves as best we could against overwhelming odds.

While such reflections as these were passing through my mind, the chief with whom I had collided so far recovered his breath as to be able to lead his men to the assault. With a yell that sent our hearts into our mouths, so to speak, the Tapuyas rushed upon us. But never before had they faced white men at bay; and, amazed and panic-stricken by the deadly discharge of our pistols, they stopped or swerved aside.

The chief and two or three of his followers had fallen, and a momentary ray of hope shot into our hearts on realising that we had repulsed the attack. The Tapuyas, however, are brave and stubborn fighters, especially when they have the advantage of overwhelming numbers; and though surprised and temporarily repelled, they were not defeated. Before we could reload our revolvers, one of the foremost savages, who from his superior ornaments evidently was a sub-chief, uttered his war-cry, and flourishing his long lance, was about to head another charge.

'Shoot that fellow, or it's all up with us!' I cried, snatching up my Winchester and endeavouring to draw a bead on him.

Ere I could properly steady the rifle in my excite-

ment, Dick fired and missed. Strangely enough, that sobered me. I felt that all depended on my wiping my comrade's eye, in sporting parlance. Steadying myself, therefore, by a great effort, I aimed and fired just as the warriors once more were springing to the attack. The bullet sped true, but instead of piercing the chieftain's heart, it struck and shattered the shaft of his lance as he waved it in front of him to incite the others. My first thought was one of chagrin at failing to knock the fellow over; but, as it happened, the effect of the shot was quite as demoralising to the superstitious red men. They apparently took it as a bad omen, and stood for some seconds as though rooted to the ground.

The respite would have been very brief, however, but for a strange and unlooked-for occurrence. Just as the young chief was making a fresh effort to rouse his men to our annihilation, a distant rifle-shot resounded through the valley and echoed amongst the rocks on the other side of the lake. Then for a moment or two there was a death-like silence, as though the unaccustomed sound had struck into dumb astonishment every breathing creature in that remote and primitive region. The Tapuyas, arrested in the very act of advance, stood like so many dusky statues with feet advanced, arms upraised, and lances poised; while, equally surprised and startled, Dick and I gazed at one another in blank amazement.

'A gunshot, by George!' exclaimed my comrade as soon as he could find his tongue.

'Ay; what means it? Hark!' I cried as a heavier bang reverberated across the water.

But this second shot was too much for the scared

Tapuyas, who evidently thought they were being taken in the rear. Panic-stricken, they turned and fled headlong down the path and through the gap by which they had come. Their flight was so precipitate that, quickly as Dick and I snatched up our rifles, we got only a snap-shot at them as they disappeared into the pass.

‘Good riddance to bad rubbish!’ was Dick’s exuberant cry as the last savage vanished from sight.

Indeed, the sudden reaction from contemplation of imminent death to at all events temporary safety affected my mercurial-tempered comrade almost to hysterics. For myself, I scarcely realised the full import of what had happened—or rather was happening. For who could have fired those shots? Who but M’Cormick? And yet he was supposed to be a hundred miles away in the land of the Incalans.

My conjectures were cut short by more firing; and as if by one impulse, we both started off as fast as we could for the top of the rocks overlooking the lake. As we ran and climbed we could hear a great commotion going on on the mainland. Shouts and yells were mingled with pistol-shots and the tramp of horses’ hoofs; and when we reached our coign of vantage on the cliff we could see, across the narrow stretch of water, a confused mass of struggling men and horses.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN THE NICK OF TIME.



THE combat raging on the lake shore was sharp and decisive, the Tapuyas evidently being no match for their mysterious adversaries.

‘Bravo! See how they run!’ exclaimed Dick, as the undisciplined horde began to break up and scatter in every direction before the repeated charges of a small but well-trained band of horsemen.

‘And that’s old Mac, or I’m a Dutchman!’ I cried, catching sight of a big man on a big horse, who seemed to bear down all before him.

Just then, however, my attention was called off by an exclamation of surprise from Stavely.

‘Look, look!’ he said. ‘Those fellows who followed us here are in a pretty pickle.’

Turning my gaze in the direction indicated by Dick’s outstretched hand, I saw the swimmers emerging on the farther side of the strait. But no sooner did they perceive how matters were going with their unfortunate kindred than they again took to the water, as though anxious to escape notice. There

chanced to be a small patch of reeds or bulrushes growing on the edge of the lake not far away, and for this they made. The water was quite shallow at that spot, but by kneeling down the wily savages were completely hidden by the tall rushes.

Our first impulse was to turn our rifles upon the skulkers and dislodge them; but on second thoughts it seemed cruel to drive them out to share the fate of their companions. Besides, just then the sharp, squib-like crack of a Winchester smote upon our ears, and once more focussed our attention on the combatants.

‘Ay, that’s Mac’s repeating rifle, I’ll swear!’ cried Dick, in ecstasies of delight at the confirmation of our hopes.

There could no longer be any doubt that our chum was there on the mainland, for we could see his familiar figure aiming and firing shot after shot at the retreating Tapuyas whenever they made any attempt to rally. He had dismounted in order to take steadier aim, but when he saw that all resistance had ceased he left off shooting and again jumped into the saddle.

At that moment Dick and I gave vent to our somewhat overwrought feelings by loud huzzas and waving of hats. This demonstration was instantly responded to by a stentorian cheer from Mac, as, putting his horse into a gallop and waving his rifle above his head, he came rapidly towards us.

‘To the raft! to the raft!’ cried Dick. ‘Let us meet him at the shore.’

He started off; and, almost equally carried away by the excitement of the moment, I was about to follow when something arrested me. It was the glitter of

steel in the sunlight, and it came from the reed-bed opposite. Its significance flashed through my mind almost as quickly as the reflected sun-rays flashed across my vision. The skulking Tapuyas were preparing to dash out upon the solitary and unsuspecting horseman.

‘Come back, Dick,’ I shouted—‘come back, or our chum is lost! He’s riding straight for the ambuscade.’

‘Heavens! I’d forgotten that,’ responded Stavely, returning instantly to my side, and joining me in the efforts I was making by signs and cries of warning to stop M’Cormick from approaching too near to the reed-bed. But all our exertions were in vain. The more we gesticulated and shouted the faster he seemed to come—for he mistook our efforts for demonstrations of welcome. He was within fifty yards of the lake when it suddenly occurred to me to fire at the Tapuyas, hoping by that means to show him there were enemies about.

‘Aim into the rushes and fire,’ I cried as, suiting the action to the word, I sent a bullet into the midst of the lurking foe

Dick was not slow in doing likewise, and the yell which followed showed that one of our shots at all events had taken effect. But what was of more importance, they discovered the ambuscade to our chum in the very nick of time to prevent his being overwhelmed by the savages. Nevertheless, he had a narrow escape. Ere he could wheel round and gallop off a few of the nearest flung themselves upon him. Their sudden appearance and the terrifying yells they uttered startled his horse, so that it began plunging and rearing with fright.

‘He’s lost! he’s lost!’ cried Dick despairingly, and turning away his head so that he might not see the end.

But M’Cormick—ex-soldier and frontiersman—was not so easily daunted and overcome. A superb horseman, he quickly regained control of his steed, and turning about, faced his assailants, revolver in hand.

‘Bravo, Mac! Well done!’ I shouted as two of the savages fell to his unerring aim.

‘Well done! well done!’ shouted Stavely, regaining confidence and glancing round at my encouraging exclamation.

But the next moment we both held our breath. A couple of the Tapuyas were advancing upon the white man simultaneously from opposite directions. One quickly shared the fate of his predecessors; but as M’Cormick turned to meet the other the savage hurled his spear straight at him.

The involuntary cry of dismay which rose to our lips turned to one of astonishment, however, as we saw the weapon glance harmlessly off, and the next instant beheld the Tapuya knocked senseless to the earth by a blow from the butt of Mac’s pistol. And then, ere we could recover from our surprise, our redoubtable chum wheeled about and rejoined his companions, who, having driven the enemy into the forest, were returning to his assistance. Without waiting to see what became of the detached body of Tapuyas, Dick and I hurried back to where we had left our wounded helpmates.

‘Gosh, sahs! me tink you both am killed,’ exclaimed Pedro, who had clambered up the bank, and was sitting, axe in hand, on a fallen tree.

‘Well, I’m glad to say you thought wrong,’ I replied. ‘But can you help us to get Chuco on shore? Mr M’Cormick has arrived with some friendly Indians, and we must take the raft to convey him here.’

‘Massa ’Cormick arrived? Hooray!’ cried the Mestizo, in joyous surprise. ‘Hooray!’ he continued. ‘Massa ’Cormick great help to fight Tapuyas.’

‘He has already been fighting them to some purpose. They’re all gone,’ broke in Stavely, busying himself in unfastening the mooring-rope, while I and Pedro lifted the poor guide on to the bank.

Notwithstanding our somewhat precarious position on the little islet, we were a jovial party round the camp-fire that evening. It was a great relief to have old Mac back again after our long separation, and he had much to tell as well as to listen to, though he begged to hear our story first.

Dick laughingly declared this was because the good fellow was ravenously hungry after his recent exertions on very scanty fare, and wished to appease the gnawings within while listening to our narrative.

There was one thing, however, we insisted upon being enlightened about, and that was the astonishing immunity of Mac and his allies from any serious wounds during their encounter with the Tapuyas. Not only was no one killed on their side, but very few were reported even to be wounded.

‘You all appeared to be perfectly invulnerable,’ said Dick; ‘and when that big Tapuya hurled his spear at you at such close quarters without its appearing to injure you, we thought you must have a charmed life.’

‘The charm is easily explained,’ responded Mac, removing his belt, and throwing open his loosely fitting Norfolk jacket.

The action displayed to our astonished gaze a shapely breast-plate. It was made of some dull metal—like oxidised steel—which scarcely shone even in the bright firelight. On closer inspection, however, it was seen to be beautifully inlaid with gold, several curious devices having been worked into the centre and about the clasps which held it and the back-piece together.

‘My gracious! What a splendid piece of armour!’ cried Stavely. ‘No wonder that spear glanced harmlessly off.’

‘It went clean through the gabardine, though,’ laughed Mac, exhibiting the double rent in his beloved garment.

‘Well, surely you don’t expect even gabardines to be spear-proof,’ I said, examining the armour more closely.

Below the breast and back plates, and attached to them by means of rings, was a sort of continuation or skirt of chain-mail; while, still lower, the legs were protected by greaves of toughened steel, and under the hat was a light skull-cap of the same metal.

‘By George, what a fraud you are, old chap!’ exclaimed Dick, who was equally inquisitive. ‘Outwardly,’ he continued, ‘you’re an innocent-looking sportsman enough, but inwardly you’d do no discredit to the Knights of the Round Table.’

‘Why don’t you say I’m a wolf in sheep’s clothing at once?’ was Mac’s laughing response as he com-

menced divesting himself of his somewhat uncomfortable underwear.

'Are all the Inca's soldiers similarly clad?' I asked, endeavouring to obtain some information on this very interesting subject.

'Not exactly,' he answered. 'It is only the emperor himself and his highest generals who wear armour of this quality. But every trained soldier is provided with a shirt of mail, and the cavalry are clad almost from head to foot in light but efficient chain-mail.'

'My goodness, what an advantage it must give them in fighting against savages armed only with spears or bows and arrows!'

'It renders them invincible under ordinary conditions,' responded Mac decisively. 'But now for supper,' he added, as Pedro announced that the venison was cooked. 'I've not had a good square meal since I left Incala.'

'Well, you'd better make the most of this one,' I said, 'for it's all the meat we managed to bring with us. The rest had to be abandoned when our guide was injured.'

'Oh, we'll soon have plenty more if those Tapuyas will keep clear of us for a time,' chimed in Dick. 'The valley appears to teem with game.'

McCormick was too busily engaged in appeasing his hunger to make much response to Stavely's observation, but he muttered something about the savages having had enough fighting to last them for some time, and that the cavalry encamped on the lake-side would keep a sharp lookout for them.

Dick and I were longing to hear all about Incala and our chum's adventures, but we knew it was use-

less to ask any more questions until he had finished eating; besides, we ourselves were desperately hungry after all our exertions. But when the meal was over and our pipes fairly alight, we insisted upon his telling us how it happened that he had arrived so opportunely to our rescue. He had put us off before by saying that it was too long a story for a half-famished man to narrate.

‘All right,’ he said, disposing his giant frame in as comfortable an attitude as circumstances permitted; ‘I’ll explain how that came about if you’ll wait for my other experiences until you’ve related your own.’

‘Agreed, old fellow; so pray go ahead,’ was the gist of our response, as we settled ourselves into easy postures to listen.

‘Well, I was with the army which the Inca sent to punish the Guambos for their incursion and outrage,’ began Mac in his brusque way. ‘We reached the pass where you were to have met us, but you were not there. Huanco, the general, was anxious to press on lest the Guambos should learn of the expedition and occupy the difficult passes which lead into their country. However, he left with me a troop of the emperor’s bodyguard, under one of the most experienced captains, and advised me to march down the river-bank to meet you.’

‘This accordingly we did, and on the morning of the following day fell in with the armed escort which had been sent down the Apurimac to bring you to the trysting-place. These men reported that they could find no trace of you or the fire-boat, and said that they thought you must have turned up some other river by mistake. My captain, whose name is

Marona, suggested the Pachitea. He said it was a large river, and was supposed to be navigable quite up to the base of the mountains.'

'And he was right, too!' interjected Stavely. 'But'——

'Order, my good fellow,' I said. 'Let Mac finish his narrative before we make remarks on it.'

'Very well.—Go on,' cried Dick good-humouredly.

'So far as I could make out of his broken Spanish,' continued Mac, 'he held a very poor opinion of the natives of that region, or of your chance of escaping with your lives if you endeavoured to force a passage up the river. This startled me and set me thinking. I put a few questions to Marona, and learnt that he knew of a trail over the mountains by which it would be possible to reach the head-waters of the Pachitea in two or three days, so well mounted as we were. And, best of all, he pluckily volunteered to take me there if I gave the word. So you may be sure,' he went on, 'I was not long in making up my mind to set out in search of you.'

'Our horses were in such hard condition, and the mountain air was so invigorating, that we rode night and day with only short halts, at long intervals, for rest and refreshment, until we came in sight of this lovely valley. We had halted on its edge, and I was scanning the opposite slope with my field-glass, when I observed several dark figures moving stealthily amongst the trees and rocks.'

"Indians! Indians!" I exclaimed aloud. "What can they be after?"

'This brought Marona quickly to my side; and on my handing him the glass, which I had previously

taught him to use, he very soon uttered the single word, "*Caramba!*" Then, beckoning me to follow, he ran towards a wooded knoll which intercepted our view of the southern extremity of the lake. Hastening after him, I reached the knoll just as Marona made an important discovery, to judge by the way he was gesticulating and flourishing my telescope about.

"*Mira!*" he cried. "*Hombres blancos por el lago abajo—Y Tapuyas en caza!*" ("Look! White men down by the lake, and Tapuyas in pursuit!")

"White men!" I almost yelled, seizing the glass in my nervous fingers and endeavouring to adjust the focus. "Then they must be my comrades!"

"*Si, Capitan—amigos vuestros en verdad!*" he acquiesced.

'One glance sufficed to show me that it was indeed you,' added Mac, 'and that you were run to earth, or rather water, by a horde of savages; for the sun's rays scintillated on their spears as they followed not far behind their scouts. As yet, however, you appeared not to be aware of their close proximity, and we feared they would take you by surprise.

'Hurriedly regaining our horses, therefore, we led the troopers by a game-track down the slope, and crossing the valley at a gallop, charged down upon the astonished Tapuyas.

'The rest you know; so now for your exploits,' concluded Mac abruptly, helping himself to a fresh pipeful of tobacco from my attenuated pouch.

CHAPTER XX.

INCALA.



BEFORE Dick and I had finished narrating our trying experiences Mac's head began to nod; and finally exhausted nature asserted itself, and he fell fast asleep. We ourselves were almost as tired, and after seeing to the comfort of our faithful attendants, we lay down, one on either side of our comrade—so as to give him the benefit of a portion of our blankets—and were soon equally oblivious of our strange position in that remote region of the mighty Andes.

Nothing occurred to disturb our dreamless slumbers, and we awoke to find the sun already high in the heavens, and the indefatigable Pedro preparing a dish, or rather tin platter, of delicious fish which he had caught in the lake. This, together with a few biscuits and a generous pot of coffee, made from a small bottle of extract which we had brought with us from the launch, constituted an excellent breakfast.

Whether it was the effects of the coffee or the good night's rest, or both combined, Mac was in capital spirits. Without our even reminding him of his promise, he began to narrate his adventures the moment

he had emptied his second cup of the refreshing infusion.

‘There now ; I know you fellows are dying to hear about Incala,’ he said by way of preface. ‘Well, I’ll soon tell you what there is to tell. The country is a vast elevated plateau, as described by our protégée, and the inhabitants are a most interesting race, or perhaps I ought to say races, for the governing class are descended from Inca nobles and Spanish *conquistadores* in varying degrees—chiefly the former, however. But the great bulk of the people are pure Indians—descendants of those who formed the subjects of Atahualpa, the unfortunate Inca whom Pizarro treacherously imprisoned and afterwards executed.

‘But you know more about this than I do,’ he added, pulling himself up short ; ‘you’ve studied Peruvian history so thoroughly.’

I bowed my acknowledgments ; and Dick blurted out, ‘Tell us about Unini, old fellow—where did you leave her ?’

M’Cormick flushed to the roots of his hair.

‘Oh, she’s all right,’ he answered bluntly, trying to appear indifferent.

But the attempt was a miserable failure, and it was some minutes ere he recovered his composure sufficiently to go on with his narrative ; Dick meanwhile doing his best to retrieve his blunder by the magnanimous offer of a choice cigar—the last he had in his case. This propitiatory sacrifice being accepted, a few whiffs soon dissipated untoward feelings and enabled Mac to resume his yarn.

‘What struck me most,’ he said, ‘after the inaccessibility of the country, was the size and beauty of the

capital. Instead of a mere village, as I had anticipated, I found a well-built city of probably ten thousand inhabitants. It reminded me of that description of Cuzco which you read out to us one evening, Phil.'

'Ah, from Prescott's *Conquest of Peru*, I suppose?'

'Yes; the city of Incala would bear comparison with any of those ancient towns, I should imagine; not only for the number and width of its streets, but also for their beauty, the solidity of the public buildings, and the orderliness of the population. The residence of the Inca is built of white marble, and though only two stories high, it covers a large extent of ground; while on a high rock, towering boldly above the city, stands a powerful fortress—the blocks of granite which form its outer defences being of titanic size, and so neatly joined together, without mortar or cement, that they appear like part of the solid rock. From the summit of the principal tower there is a varied and extensive view. In the foreground lies the city, with its long boulevards and capacious squares; while the vast number of trees and shrubs, many of them in full bloom, and the tiny canals of sparkling water running at the side of every street, make up a picture it would be impossible to exaggerate.

'Beyond this park-like metropolis stretch verdant plains, dark woods, rocky knolls, lakes, rivers, and streams in bewildering profusion far as the eye can reach—and in the clear atmosphere of that lofty tableland one's vision extends to an extraordinary distance.'

'Why, it must be as beautiful as this valley!' I exclaimed.

‘Ay, and *more* beautiful, to draw such eloquence from old Mac,’ interpolated Dick, laughing.

‘It’s different from this,’ said Mac, not deigning to notice our comrade’s facetiousness. ‘Here everything is natural, while there a great deal is artificial. Many of the lakes have been formed by damming the streams at suitable spots, and the higher and poorer portions of the tableland have been planted with araucarias and other evergreen and deciduous trees. The smaller knolls are generally covered with pretty flowering shrubs and creepers, and the larger ones with pines; but some are only bare rock.

‘There are large fields of barley and *oca* or quinoa (a kind of rice), and the abundant pastures support immense herds of cattle, flocks of alpacas, and droves of horses.’

‘My goodness! it seems to be a very flourishing country altogether,’ I said.

‘Speaks well for the government, whatever it is,’ added Dick.

‘Oh, the government is altogether patriarchal,’ said Mac—‘a modification of that before the Spanish conquest, I should think.’

‘Than which,’ I added, ‘it is recorded by the earliest of the invading Spaniards, “no government could have been better suited to the genius of the people, and no people could have appeared more contented with their lot or more devoted to their government.”’

‘Well,’ responded Mac, ‘that exactly describes the state of things in Incala to-day, judging by what I saw during my short stay there. But you ought to see the country for yourselves,’ he added. ‘I would never have believed, had I not witnessed it, that such

a marvellous state of civilisation would be found in so unknown and remote a region. Besides the fortress and buildings, the avenues and canals, already mentioned, there are other engineering works which testify to the extraordinary skill of these Indians.'

'Prescott's researches,' I observed, 'seemed clearly to show that the intellectual power of the Inca nobility was far above that of the ordinary natives of Peru, and it was they who constituted the real strength of the empire. The Indians proper supplied the muscle and sinew to execute the works designed by the more highly endowed race which they served.'

'Such is still the case, I should imagine, at Incala,' said Mac; 'for every office and post of any consequence, both civil and military, is held by those who are of the royal blood. There is no mistaking this fact. They are quite of another and distinct type from the ordinary natives of the country. Their physiognomy and bearing both show it, even if they did not wear a slightly different dress and a small aigrette to distinguish them.'

'It's like some story of the *Arabian Nights*,' exclaimed Dick. 'But how about that treasure we're in search of? Did you learn anything more of its whereabouts?'

McCormick's countenance fell at the skipper's concluding words.

'Very little,' he replied brusquely. 'The fact is,' he added after a slight pause, 'the subject seemed to be tabooed at the court; and though Atitacama was never tired of fêting and honouring me in every way he could out of gratitude for his daughter's recovery, he never alluded to the lost ransom after the first inter-

view. Unini on that occasion told him of our purpose in coming to Peru, and he then had assented to her proposal that we should be allowed to accompany any punitive expedition sent against the savages who had kidnapped her. But afterwards he never reverted to the subject, and always adroitly turned the conversation if either Unini or myself endeavoured to broach it.'

'The dickens he did!' exclaimed Dick, in disgust.

'Yes,' responded Mac quietly; 'and I believe I know the reason.'

'Indeed! Then perhaps you'll enlighten us, old fellow.'

'Well,' said Mac in the same quiet tone, 'I believe it's a point of honour with the Indians of every grade, from the Inca downwards, to keep the secret of the ancient treasure, or rather its hiding-place, with the most rigid fidelity. Unini, with her broader sympathies and more open-hearted nature—the result, perhaps, of the Spanish blood in her veins—sees no harm in aiding men who have done her so great a service to find and carry away what they can of the useless hoard. The same generous sentiments very likely animated her imperial sire in the first flush of his joy at recovering her. Subsequently, however, and in his calmer moments, considerations of policy induced, or perhaps obliged, him to conform to popular sentiment, and to refrain from giving any further aid or encouragement to us.'

'That's awkward,' I said. 'What shall we do?'

'There's Unini—she'll do what she can. And for the rest we must rely upon our own efforts.'

'I vote we take advantage of your escort to re-

connoitre the country and try to locate the treasure,' struck in Dick. 'These Incalans owe us some service in return for our having saved their princess.'

'Perhaps so,' I replied; 'but we have no right to employ the troopers in any other capacity than the one for which they were detailed by their chief.'

'Right you are, old fellow!' responded Dick. 'So perhaps Mac will suggest something better.'

'My advice,' said Mac, still speaking slowly and deliberately, as though he had well weighed the matter in his mind, 'is to go back with these men to Incala; and if we find the emperor still unwilling to assist us, we may at least be able to secure a guide who knows the Guambos' country.'

'To be sure,' broke in Dick; 'Unini would doubtless help us to do that.'

The ex-soldier's colour heightened at the mention of her name, but he added quietly, 'Yes, she'll find some means of putting us on the right tack, you may depend upon it.'

Having reached this conclusion, Dick and I rose to attend to poor Chuco's wounds, while Mac indulged in a quiet smoke. The afternoon was spent in arranging and preparing for our projected journey.

The next morning found us somewhat in a dilemma. It was a glorious day, and Mac and Dick were impatient to be off; but, alas! poor Chuco was quite unfit to travel, and Pedro was still rather lame. The latter might have got along fairly well with an occasional lift on one of the troopers' horses, but the Indian's condition demanded absolute rest for a time.

I volunteered to remain behind and nurse him, but my comrades would not hear of that; so Pedro re-

quested that he might be allowed to stay with him. Finally this was agreed to; and having knocked up a rough shanty or hut to shelter the invalid, and left the two men a good supply of food, we were ready to start by midday.

‘They’ll not starve at all events,’ said Dick. ‘The valley is well stocked with game, and the lake teeming with fish.’

‘I’m not afraid of that,’ I said; ‘but how about the savages?’

‘There’s not much likelihood of their returning, I should think, after the beating they got yesterday,’ responded Dick. ‘What say you, Mac?’

‘It’s generally the unexpected that happens,’ answered the ex-soldier, ‘so I mean to take precautions. If Marona is willing, I’ll leave a couple of the troopers to strengthen the garrison. This, too, would help us out of another difficulty.’

‘What is that?’ I asked.

‘Well, mounts for you and Dick,’ he replied. ‘We shall get along twice as fast if all are mounted; and doubtless you’d prefer riding to walking.’

‘Decidedly, old fellow; though this exhilarating air makes almost any exercise a pleasure.’

By this time we were all on board the raft, with Pedro to row it back again. Crossing the little channel in silence, we found Marona and his men drawn up in readiness for marching. After a few words with the chief, M’Cormick sprang upon his own charger and rode along the ranks. He seemed to be examining each horse critically as he passed, and presently two were singled out and their riders dismounted. Marona himself then came forward and

ordered the selected horses to be brought to Dick and myself, and after we had mounted them he addressed the two troopers in their own language; the result being that they returned with Pedro to the islet, while we, joining Mac and Marona, rode off at the head of their comrades *en route* for Incala.

All went well that day and the following one, and both Dick and I thoroughly enjoyed being on horse-back once more. We neither of us had crossed a saddle for nearly six months, but we felt none the less at home in one on that account, especially as the Incalan saddles were so much more comfortable than our English ones. Instead of thick, unpliant flaps, difficult to grip, there was nothing but soft deerskin or guanaco hide between one's nether limbs and the horse's body. The seat was made of the same material, well padded with wool, and shaped so as to afford the greatest possible support and ease to the rider. The stirrups were of some tough kind of wood, steamed and bent into a proper form to receive the feet.

The second evening, we arrived on the edge of what appeared to be an extinct volcano, high up in the mountains. The track—it could scarcely be called a path—wound half round the ancient crater, and Marona said it was unsafe to proceed along it by the waning light, as the sun had already dipped behind the western peaks. Accordingly we bivouacked in a shallow depression close at hand, and waited for morning—little dreaming what the morning would bring with it.

CHAPTER XXI.

SURROUNDED.



WAS awakened out of a sound sleep by some one gripping me tightly by the shoulders and uttering my name beneath his breath.

‘Hillo! What’s up?’ I cried, starting to my feet.

‘Hist! Don’t make a noise, and I’ll tell you.’

It was M’Cormick who spoke. He was standing over me, rifle in hand, and my first thought was that he wanted me to accompany him in pursuit of some guanacos whose tracks he had noticed the previous evening.

‘Won’t Dick go with you?’ I said, rubbing my eyes. ‘I don’t feel equal to a stalk this morning.’

‘It’s not a question of stalking, but of being stalked, I fear,’ answered Mac; and there was something in the tone of his voice, half-whisper though it was, which roused me very effectually.

‘Come, and I’ll show you something,’ he added, leading the way to the higher ground at the edge of the old crater.

I followed in silence, wondering what was going to

happen. One thing, however, somewhat reassured me, and that was that the weary troopers were all slumbering peacefully round their fires—or, rather, the still smouldering embers. The sentries, too, were standing motionless at their posts; while the tethered horses lay stretched out at full length upon the bare earth, as though determined to get rest in lieu of pasturage from the barren spot. On reaching the top of the little ridge Mac halted, and pointed with his hand down the path up which we had ridden the evening before.

‘There!’ he said. ‘What do you make of that?’

Day was only just dawning, but there was light enough to see some distance, and I clearly discerned a dark mass on the mountain slope below us. It seemed to block the narrow pass through which we had come.

‘Savages, by George!’ I exclaimed. ‘They must have followed our trail.’

M’Cormick made no response, but, turning about, pointed in the opposite direction, along the trail which skirted the ancient crater. I followed the direction of his outstretched arm, but at first could see nothing unusual. There was the narrow ridge of crumbling shale, with the yawning crater on one side, the steep boulder-strewn declivity on the other. There were the jagged rocks that seemed to bar the passage altogether; and beyond—— Ah! what was beyond?

‘Good heavens!’ I cried, ‘can those, too, be savages?’

Mac raised his finger warningly. ‘Hist! We don’t want to disturb the troopers until we are decided upon a plan of action.’

So saying, he drew me back a few paces to where Marona was standing listening to the report of one of

his scouts. Mac recognised the latter as the man who first discovered the presence of the savages, and who, after communicating the news to his chief, had been sent to apprise him also.

We only understood a word now and then of what was said, as, of course, it was in the Quichua tongue; but when the scout retired with orders to awake the soldiers as quietly and yet expeditiously as possible, Mac held a short, earnest consultation with the captain. They conversed in Spanish, which Marona understood fairly well, for, like all who held any office or authority in the State, he belonged to the royal Inca race.

Almost before I had recovered from the bewilderment into which these unexpected and startling developments had thrown me, a plan of action had been decided upon by my companions. And not a moment too soon, for already the Guambos, as they proved to be, were signalling to one another as though they were about to attack us. Seeing no movement in our camp, they evidently expected to take us by surprise.

‘Come; we must awake Dick,’ cried Mac, catching me by the arm, and starting for the place where our comrade was still sleeping, all-unconscious of the danger.

As we hurried along he explained in a few words what was to be done. ‘So soon,’ he said, ‘as the enemy arrive within a short distance of our position, we are to charge down upon them and endeavour to break through in that direction—the narrow track along the edge of the old crater being quite impracticable with the savages in possession of the rocks beyond.’

‘Our chances don’t seem very bright,’ I said.

‘Not very,’ responded Mac, bracing up his saddle-girths. ‘We’re in a tight place, to be sure; but I’ve been in worse.’

There was no confusion; every man seemed to realise the need for prompt obedience to orders. In an incredibly short time the horses were saddled, and the troopers mounted and formed up, with Marona at their head. Mac, Dick, and I, with half-a-dozen picked men, were detailed to watch the narrow track, and prevent the savages beyond the crater from taking us in the rear while we were awaiting the proper moment to charge.

Save for the occasional champ of bit or stamp of hoof, perfect silence reigned in the little hollow. We were invisible to the main body of savages advancing up the mountain; but those on the rocks, quickly observing our movement, endeavoured to apprise their allies of it. These latter, however, misinterpreting the signals, advanced all the more rapidly.

Presently one of our scouts, who was lying on his face behind a boulder at the edge of the depression, raised his head. This was to warn us that the assailants were within a very short distance of him. Immediately, waving his baton, Marona led his men quietly up the incline, and gaining the ridge, dashed down upon the astonished enemy with stentorian shouts.

‘Huick, forrard!’ cried Dick, carried away by the excitement of the moment; and striking spurs into his horse, he galloped after the charging cavalry, regardless of orders.

M’Cormick bawled out to him to stop, but his voice was drowned in the cries and yells of the combatants

and the clash of arms. A moment later we had our own work cut out for us. Without a cry or sound of warning, the savages from beyond the crater came streaming along the narrow trail and attacked us while our attention was diverted by Dick's escapade. The death-shriek of one of the Incalans as he fell pierced by a lance was the first intimation of the sudden onslaught. Then, as we turned to meet it, the Guambos, seeing our insignificant numbers, raised a yell of triumph and threw themselves upon us—doubtless anticipating an easy victory.

'Steady, men—shoot low!' cried Mac, raising his repeating rifle and opening fire on the instant.

I followed suit with my revolver, and the Incalans resolutely levelled their long lances. Evidently the savages had never faced firearms before. They halted at the first discharge, and uttering cries of dismay, turned and fled by the way that they had come—all but those who had fallen under the leaden hail.

'Now dismount and follow me!' shouted Mac, springing from his horse, and running along the path after the flying savages.

Without waiting to consider the possible consequences of this seemingly rash step—for it meant separating ourselves from Dick and the main body of Incalans—I jumped down and hastened after my leader. Two of the troopers followed me, but the others turned their horses' heads and galloped on the heels of the struggling squadron, still, to judge by the uproar, striving to force a passage through the enemy.

We were just in time to support M'Cormick at a critical juncture; for, observing that he was alone,

several of the Guambos had rallied, and were awaiting him behind the rocks. No sooner was he within reach than they sprang out upon him, one big fellow throwing himself on to his neck and trying to drag him to the edge of the precipice, while two others prodded at him with their spears. Luckily the well-tempered armour stood Mac in good stead, and before he received any serious hurt I and the troopers arrived and beat off the two spearmen.

Meanwhile my powerful comrade grappled with his assailant, and for a few seconds the two men hugged and strained for the mastery. At first the redskin seemed likely to conquer, his sudden assault and greasy, unclothed body giving him a great advantage. Besides, he seemed indifferent to his own fate provided he could compass the death of the white man. Struggling and fighting like a maniac, once, twice he got my unlucky chum within a foot of the crater's edge, but as often by a desperate effort Mac saved himself.

The Incalans having gone on to clear the path and prevent the Guambos from rallying once more, I did what I could to aid my comrade. This, however, proved no easy matter, for the wrestlers turned and twisted and swayed about so much that I was afraid even to strike, and much less to shoot, lest I should hit the wrong man. At length, however, M'Cormick succeeded in getting a good grip of his swarthy foe, and the Indian's fate was sealed :

That desperate grasp his frame might feel
Through bars of brass and triple steel.

M'Cormick held his adversary for a few seconds, as though collecting himself for a final effort ; then, put-



Putting forth all his giant strength, he lifted the Guambo off his feet and flung him into the yawning abyss.

ting forth all his giant strength, he lifted the Guambo off his feet and flung him into the yawning abyss which he himself had so narrowly escaped. For a moment or two we both stood, half-petrified with horror, staring into the old volcano, and waiting for the thud of the heavy body as it struck the bottom. To our surprise, instead of a thud, it was the half-muffled sound of a distant splash which came up from the depths below.

‘Water, by George!’ I exclaimed.

Too dazed or breathless to speak, Mac nodded acquiescence. The terrible struggle for life on the brink of that horrible chasm had been more than even his iron nerves could stand, and he trembled like a leaf. Stepping up to him, I seized his hand in mine, and leading him from the spot, congratulated him heartily on his victory.

Meanwhile the two troopers had disappeared from view, though we could still hear their shouts as they drove the demoralised savages before them down the farther side of the mountain.

‘Run and call them back,’ gasped Mac. ‘They’ll be getting trapped.’

Accordingly, leaving my comrade to recover his breath, I hastened after the two brave but rash Incalans. On reaching the farther edge of the volcanic cone, the path dropped abruptly towards a deep valley. Looking down, I saw the troopers still in eager pursuit of some half-dozen Guambos.

Suddenly, as I shouted to the men to come back, the scene changed. Instead of a few flying savages, a score or two of well-armed warriors unexpectedly appeared from behind the rocks, and, with fierce

yells, flung themselves upon the troopers. Drawing my revolver, I fired in the direction of the savages, with the idea not only of diverting their attention, but also of warning M'Cormick of what was happening. I then ran as fast as I could to the spot; but, quick as I was, I was too late to save the brave fellows.

At the first alarm they had placed themselves back to back; but though they fought like lions, the odds were too great, and they fell pierced by a dozen spears. I should doubtless have shared a similar fate but for the Guambos' dread of firearms. Luckily, too, the sounds of fighting acted on M'Cormick like a powerful restorative. Struggling to the edge of the cone, and resting his repeating rifle on a boulder, he fired into the wavering crowd, thus completing their discomfiture.

The gallant troopers were beyond our aid, but we dragged their bodies into a crevice and covered them with loose pieces of rock. Then, after resting a moment or two to recover our exhausted powers of body and mind, we hastened back to the fateful ridge. I was a few paces in advance—for Mac was still suffering from the effects of his terrible struggle—and as I set foot upon the narrow path, something on the opposite side of the crater caught my eye. It was the figure of a solitary horseman silhouetted against the snowy background of the Cordilleras.

CHAPTER XXII.

CAUGHT NAPPING.

‘ICK—there’s Dick!’ I cried. ‘Hur’——

But the wish was father to the thought, and the cheer died upon my lips as I saw that the horseman was an Indian.

‘Why, it’s Marona! I can see his plume of eagle’s feathers,’ explained Mac, coming up.

There could be no mistake about it. The dress, the accoutrements, the big black charger, all proclaimed the Incalan chief. Surprise and disappointment that it was not our chum held us irresolute for a moment. Then, waving our arms in response to the chief’s uplifted baton, we hastened towards him. In a few minutes we were by his side. He had dismounted, and was leaning against a large boulder, holding his charger by the bridle. Both man and beast bore unmistakable evidence of the fierceness of the fray. The poor quadruped, indeed, seemed scarcely able to stand. It was badly slashed about the legs, and flecked all over with foam and blood; while Marona himself, though bleeding from several wounds, evidently was more exhausted than seriously hurt. He

was soon able to give an account of himself, which Mac interpreted to me during the pauses the narrator had to make through shortness of breath.

It seemed that less than half the troopers succeeded in cutting their way through the enemy. The rest had perished or, what was worse, had been taken prisoners by the Guambos. Marona himself, when almost clear of the fray, turned back on hearing Dick's cry for help. The latter's horse had fallen, and he was at the mercy of the savages. Followed by two or three of his men, the chief charged into the yelling mob and attempted a rescue. But in vain. His followers were killed, and he himself only escaped as it were by a miracle. Then, seeing that it would be impossible to get through the pass, he put spurs to his horse and galloped back up the mountain, hoping to find us there, as we had not followed in the wake of the cavalry.

Mac explained in a few words how we had been occupied in repulsing the enemy until too late to retire to advantage, except along the edge of the crater. Marona remarked that he too would have chosen that route if he had known our firearms would have been so effectual in clearing a passage, though it would have entailed abandoning the horses. He added that our only chance now was to hasten after the Guambos and endeavour to reach the foot of the mountain ere they recovered from their panic.

Time was precious, and as soon as we had bound up the chief's wounds we again threaded our way through the boulders and along the treacherous path—for in places it was worn away to a mere strip of rubble six or eight inches wide. But before starting we put an

end to the poor charger's existence. 'We could not take it with us; and to have left it there a prey to the wild beasts, or to perish of hunger and thirst, would have been cruel.

We marched in silence, each occupied with his own thoughts. It was evident that Marona deeply felt the loss of so many of his brave men, not to mention his gallant charger; while Mac and I were not less depressed at the unhappy fate of our chum. Marona had expressed the opinion that the Guambos had not killed him, but would carry him back with them to their mountain fastnesses, and either keep him there as a hostage or torture him to death. He said the only chance we had of rescuing him would be by enlisting the aid of Huanco and his army, now probably operating against the savages to the southward.

Extracting what comfort we could from this view, we trudged steadily on all day, merely stopping for a few minutes to drink or refill our flasks at an occasional stream. By nightfall we had traversed a wide valley, and were beginning to ascend the steep slopes of the opposite mountain-range. I was ready to drop with fatigue, when Marona, who acted as guide, took a sudden turn to the left, and halted in front of what appeared to be a large cave in the side of the hill.

'Thank goodness, we've reached some sort of a refuge at last!' exclaimed Mac. 'I thought we were in for a night on the mountain.'

'And so did I—though I couldn't have walked another mile to save my life,' I said, throwing myself on the ground; while Mac and the Indian made a careful survey of the cavern, to make sure it harboured no skulking savages.

These investigations proving satisfactory, we collected a heap of sticks from some adjoining scrub, and lighting a fire, proceeded to make ourselves as comfortable as possible. Though the days were very hot, owing to the brilliant sunshine, the nights were extremely cold, and a fire was quite as necessary on the score of warmth as it was for the purpose of preparing food and drink. We had neither tea nor coffee, what little we had brought from the islet having been lost in the fighting. Luckily, however, Marona found some bushes of yerba amongst the scrub, and a handful of the leaves made almost as refreshing an infusion as that from the usual beverage.

Our frugal meal over, we lay down on the dry, sandy floor, and were soon fast asleep—at least Mac and I were. Marona had volunteered to keep watch. But how long his vigil lasted I cannot say, for when I awoke some time in the dead of night he, like my chum, was slumbering heavily. Exhausted nature had asserted itself, and in spite of his strenuous desire to keep awake, and the knowledge that probably his own life as well as ours depended on his doing so, he had failed.

I was always a light sleeper, but what it was that awakened me on this occasion I probably never shall know. Wide awake, however, I was, and with an indefinable feeling that something was about to happen. Slowly raising myself on to my elbow, and turning my face towards the entrance of the cavern, I gazed into the darkness without. But keen-sighted as I was, there was no suspicious object visible, nor any sound audible—save the rustle of leaves as the wind swept through the adjacent catigos.

Nevertheless, I was only half-reassured, and was debating with myself as to the advisability of awakening my companions, when suddenly my straining ears were assailed by a most terrific yell. At the same moment the opening became black with savages, and almost before I could spring to my feet they were upon us—actually and literally upon us; for, sweeping me aside by sheer weight of numbers, the foremost fell headlong over my still recumbent comrades, and pinned them to the ground.

I myself was wedged so tightly against the side of the cavern that I was powerless to use my Winchester, although I had it in my hands. Our fire had burnt itself out, and the darkness was so intense within the cave that as yet the Guambos seemed unaware of my presence. Had I been near the opening, therefore, I might have edged my way out and escaped. As it was, I could neither help myself nor my companions.

It was a horrible situation: the pitchy darkness, the crowding mass of savages, the despairing cries and struggles of the captives, the fierce yells and triumphant shouts of the captors, and my own terrible suspense of mind—expecting each moment to be my last. It was infernal.

But it did not last very long. Suddenly a flash of light illumined the cave. The savages outside had made torches of pine branches, and were holding them aloft near the entrance. I tried to squat down, but it was impossible to do so, and the attempt only betrayed me the sooner to my enemies. One of them, catching sight of me, instantly clubbed me on the head with a sort of battle-axe which he was flourish-

ing aloft. I was knocked senseless, and knew no more until I found myself lying on my back in the glaring sunshine. My head was aching so badly that it felt as though it would split open, while my wrists and ankles were so tightly bound with strips of raw hide as to cause me excruciating pain.

My first impression was that I was being tortured to death; and if I had been stretched on the Inquisitorial rack of hateful memory, I could scarcely have suffered greater agony. The relentless sun beating upon my upturned face was almost maddening, and with a groan of anguish I tried to turn upon my side. I failed, and tried again and again. But it was useless. I was lying in a sort of shallow trench, and every time I endeavoured to move on to my shoulder I rolled back into my original position.

At last I lay still from sheer exhaustion; and then a slight sound attracted my attention. It was as if some heavy body was dragging itself, or being dragged, along the ground. Listening intently, I fancied the noise became louder, as though the body were coming towards me. Presently I heard the thick, heavy breathing of some one close beside me, and a voice which I at once recognised as Mac's whispered in my ear:

'Keep up your spirits, old fellow; this won't last long.'

'Where are we? What has happened?'

'We're prisoners of the Guambos—worse luck! The brutes are marching us into the mountains, and have left us here in the broiling sun, while they enjoy their siesta in the shade of the rocks just below.'

'Ah, I remember; and where is Marona?'

‘Oh, he’s a marvel,’ answered Mac—‘lies like a log. You’d think he was dead, and yet he must be suffering as much as we are.’

‘That’s his Indian stoicism, I suppose. I envy him his apparent insensibility to pain.’

‘He sets us a fine example,’ responded Mac, trying to get his shoulder under me and turn me on my side—a kindly act in which he at length succeeded, to my intense relief.

‘What do you think the savages will do with us?’ I asked, after thanking my comrade for his help.

‘Heaven knows!’ was the terse reply; and then after a pause he added, ‘Marona thinks that these bands into whose hands we have unluckily fallen are retreating before the Incalans, and that Huanco and his army are not far off.’

‘Then I suppose the chances are about even, whether our captors kill us out of hand or hold us as hostages.’

‘That’s about it, no doubt,’ responded Mac gloomily.

The prospect certainly was not cheerful, and we both remained for a minute or two thinking over our unhappy situation. All at once a confused noise of mingled blows and shouts, ear-piercing yells and ringing cheers, frantic cries and despairing shrieks, came rolling up the mountain-side.

‘Good heavens! what’s that?’ I cried.

‘The Incalans, by Jove! We’re saved, old chap!’ was the joyful response.

But we were reckoning without our hosts, for the warriors who had been deputed to guard us ran up at the sound of our voices, and cutting the straps

which bound our ankles, urged us forward along the mountain track. It was maddening to be thus thwarted and deprived of the anticipated rescue, and with one accord we offered a strenuous resistance. This so enraged the Guambos that they evidently determined to make short work of us. Seizing us by our legs and arms, they half-carried, half-dragged us to the edge of the path. One glance was sufficient to show us that we were on the brink of a frightful precipice. We could not see the bottom of it, but we could hear the sounds of the strife far below; and judging by the prevailing cheers of the Incalans. they were rapidly forcing the pass. It was easy to divine the purpose of the savages. We were to be hurled down upon the heads of our advancing rescuers!

CHAPTER XXIII.

FOR DEAR LIFE.



DEATH under such circumstances seemed doubly hard, and we struggled against it as desperate men only could. With our arms bound behind us we were terribly handicapped; nevertheless we wrenched ourselves free more than once.

M'Cormick surpassed himself. He was like some ancient gladiator contending for victory against overwhelming odds. Thrice he succeeded in shaking off the clustering Guambos, but each time he was recaptured while trying to render us needful help. But for him both Marona and myself would inevitably have perished.

Once when I had been forced to the very brink of the cliff, and having thrown myself on the ground, was clinging by my knee to a tiny bush, Mac rushed to the rescue. With one mighty kick he sent the nearest savage flying over me into space, and with another he projected a second, who was about to hack at my legs with his tomahawk, into the branches of a tree which overhung the gorge.

Notwithstanding our almost superhuman exertions,

however, we must eventually have been overpowered and hurled from the cliff had not one of the head chiefs opportunely arrived on the scene. He seemed greatly enraged at what was going on, and dismissing the men who had had charge of us, he consigned us to the care of his own braves. This action, as we afterwards discovered, was not dictated by any humanitarian motives, but merely by a desire to reserve us for more protracted sufferings.

The change of guards having been thus effected, we were hustled along the track at a pace which tried our powers to the utmost after the fatigues and exertions we had already undergone. What made our position more trying, too, was that, being separated from one another on the march, we were unable to exchange a single word. Nevertheless, we buoyed ourselves up with the hope that sooner or later the victorious Incalans would overtake and release us.

The farther we went, however, the fainter became our hopes of rescue, for it was evident that our captors were taking us by some track only known to themselves, and quite impracticable for mounted troops. We were hurried along until far into the night, and then only permitted to lie down upon the bare ground for a few hours while the Guambos waited for daylight. These savages seemed almost insensible to fatigue, and Marona told us that they were able to sustain their strength throughout journeys of several days' duration by simply chewing the leaves of a shrub called coca. This plant (*Erythroxylon coca*) grows in the same localities as the famous cinchona, and even extends into the hottest lowlands and swamps. It appears to be the

natural stimulant, as cinchona or Peruvian bark is the natural febrifuge, for those who live in the tropical and less wholesome low-lying districts of central South America.

At the first sign of dawn we were roused from our slumbers—for exhausted nature had triumphed over even mental anxiety—and marched onward again. In about an hour's time we reached the summit of the mountain range, and here nearly half the savages were ordered to remain and guard the pass. The rest conducted us quickly down into the adjacent valley. This appeared to be of a considerable area, and there was a pretty rivulet winding through it.

But what specially attracted our attention was the ruin of an old fortalice, similar to the one we had seen on the cliffs at the head of the Pachitea. It stood boldly out from the summit of a steep, rocky spur, which, projecting into the valley, dominated it effectually. There were a few other ruins scattered along the edge of the rivulet, and amongst these clustered the rude huts or lodges of the Guambos.

We scarcely had time to note these things, however, before the chief gave an order to his men; and we were immediately hustled off in the direction of the ancient castle. After traversing a narrow winding path for some distance, we crossed the stream by what remained of a curious stone bridge; and then ascending several long flights of steps cut out of the solid rock, we at length found ourselves within the ancient stronghold. Through its massive portal and spacious hall we were hurried, and unceremoniously thrust into a vaulted chamber beyond. There was no door to this gloomy apartment, so a couple of the Guambos

stood guard at the entrance, spear in hand; while their comrades prepared to bivouac in the entrance-hall or the courtyard without.

Our hands were still bound behind us, though our legs remained free. We were almost fainting from want of food and rest, and far too weak to make any effort at escape even if there had been the least chance of succeeding. There was a peculiarly weird feeling in the air, too, which affected our spirits not a little—an ominous stillness as of an impending storm or other convulsion of nature. We had experienced nothing like it before in the otherwise glorious climate of these mountain regions.

For a long time none of us spoke. We simply lay exhausted and half-dazed on the stone floor of our prison. Meanwhile our captors were feasting on venison and other game brought to them by the Guambos from the adjacent village. When they had eaten to repletion the chief spoke a few words, and the remains of the repast were brought to the entrance and thrown in to us as though we were dogs. Then came a couple of savages with earthenware jars full of greasy-looking water. Yet so ravenous were we that we ate the scraps and drank the grease almost with relish. Afterwards we fell into a sound sleep, awaking to find it quite dark and our poor bodies shivering with cold. Nevertheless we felt greatly refreshed by the food and rest, and huddling together for warmth, conversed in low tones.

‘What do you think they’ll do to us?’ I asked of Mac.

‘Heaven only knows, old chap!’ was the grim response; then after a pause: ‘It’s sure to be death

in some cruel form or other, so I mean to seize the first chance that presents, however desperate, to escape. Better to die fighting than be tortured to death at the stake.'

'By all means,' I said. 'And why not make our attempt now, under cover of the darkness?'

'It would be impossible to force a way through all these savages,' replied Mac, 'unless we could first get our hands free; but perhaps Marona can suggest something;' and turning, he conversed for some minutes in Spanish with the captain.

'Our friend thinks we'd better wait for daylight,' he said at last, whispering into my ear. 'He says, and truly, that even if we escaped the spears of the Guambos, we should run great risk of breaking our necks over a precipice in the dark.'

'No doubt the Incalan is right,' I answered, 'unless, of course, something turns up meanwhile; though this suspense is terribly trying.'

'True, old chap. And what do you think? Marona says that this used to be one of the summer abodes of the Incas—where they were accustomed to retire to in the hottest weather. He declares that there is a secret chamber somewhere within the fortalice containing gold in vast quantities. An ancestor of his had charge of the place in the Inca Manco's time, and defended it against the Spaniards as long as he could. At length, finding further resistance hopeless, he threw himself from the battlements rather than be taken alive and tortured by the cruel and avaricious victors to make him reveal the treasure.'

'Ah, I believe the incident is mentioned in Prescott's

book,' I said. 'But if we really are so near this hidden wealth, what a mockery it seems when we're here only as helpless prisoners waiting for death, or worse!'

'True, old chap; but *nil desper*'—

Mac's cheery response was cut short by a warning cry from the Incalan.

'*Guarda!*' he repeated under his breath; and at that moment the entrance was darkened by a tall figure.

It was the chief of the Guambos. He called to us in his native jargon, and was answered by Marona. Then he seemed to be making quite a harangue. When he ceased speaking Marona interpreted the gist of what he had said. It was to the effect that we were trespassers on his people's grounds, and that by their law every white man who entered their territories must suffer death—that was the penalty. A rumour had reached him that we had come from a distant country in search of treasure. He couldn't understand why it was that white men were all so filled with the greed of gold, or why they should run such risks to obtain it. However, the Guambos, admiring their courage, would so far gratify this strange whim of their captives as to permit them to die and be entombed for ever in the golden hall of the Incas, surrounded by heaps upon heaps of the yellow metal!

'How extremely considerate!' was the almost involuntary comment that escaped me as Marona concluded. I really was too dazed to know clearly what I said. Mac did not speak. As for the Incalan, I noticed that while speaking he was quietly backing

farther away from the opening, evidently anticipating being at once dragged off to the doom in store for us.

His instinct was not at fault, for the chief immediately gave some command to his followers, and in another minute a man holding a lighted torch advanced from the outer hall, followed by a posse of muscular and ferocious-looking warriors.

'It's all up with us now. Good-bye, old chap,' said Mac in a voice which sounded unnaturally calm at such a crisis.

I tried to respond, but my tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of my mouth, and not a word could I utter.

'Oh for one minute's use of my hands!' cried Mac, vainly endeavouring to wrench them loose. 'I'd give that cynical chief something to remember me by. And, by heaven, I will, too!' he added, moved to fury by the thought of being dragged to a living tomb.

At the same time, lowering his shoulder football fashion, he charged the astonished chief with such sudden and resistless vigour as hurled him backwards upon the advancing torch-bearer. The latter, being equally unprepared, went down like a ninepin beneath his falling chief. Then, as drowning men who clutch at straws, Marona and I attempted to profit by our comrade's valour. Instantly throwing himself upon the prostrate Guambos, Marona prevented them from rising, while I put my foot upon the flaming torch and extinguished it. The remaining savages, amazed and scared by our unexpected action, hesitated to advance into the gloomy chamber—for but little light was cast within the doorway by the solitary remain-

ing torch which burned in the outer hall. The moment appeared to offer a chance, if only a slender one, and Mac was not the man to let it slip.

‘Now or never!’ he cried, instantly springing over the prostrate forms that obstructed the entrance, and endeavouring to dodge or break through the crowd of warriors without.

As I plunged madly after him, the chief’s voice rose high above the tumult, yelling out an imperious command. This decided our fate, for, quickly rallying to the cry, his men closed in upon us; and despite our frantic efforts, we were completely overpowered by sheer weight of numbers.

Meanwhile a lucky accident befell the gallant Incalan in his struggle with the chief. Thinking at once to end the contest, the latter drew his knife and struck heavily at Marona’s back. The badly tempered blade, however, failed to pierce the Incalan armour, but glancing downwards, wounded him slightly in the wrists. It did more, for it nearly severed the thongs that bound them. Instinctively realising what had happened, Marona wrenched asunder the remaining shreds, and, with a cry of triumph, sprang to his feet. The chief was up almost as quickly, but, stumbling over the torch-bearer, failed to arrest the flying prisoner. His warning shout, however, raised instant opposition to the latter’s bold bid for freedom. It also attracted my comrade’s attention, as well as my own, to what was taking place.

Doubtless with the object of creating a diversion in the brave Incalan’s favour, Mac, hopelessly overpowered as he was, shouted out:

‘Hurrah! One more effort, boys!’ at the same

time striving with all his great strength to break away from the half-dozen Guambos who were grappling him. He failed, but not entirely, for during the brief but desperate struggle I saw the tall, dark figure of the Incalan flit past. He had successfully dodged a couple of braves who endeavoured to intercept him, and was within a few strides of the apparently open portal. Just as he reached it, however, an armed sentry sprang from behind one of the massive pillars, and, levelling his spear, barred the exit.

The tardy dawn was just breaking, and there was light enough by the entrance for me to see clearly all that was taking place. For the moment I forgot my own desperate case in my anxiety for the brave Marona. I groaned aloud as I perceived that not only was he confronted by the warrior's gleaming spear, but close behind him was the chief himself in hot pursuit, his long knife held threateningly aloft.

Unarmed, however, though he was, Atitacama's guardsman was not easily to be thwarted. His hands at least were free, and seizing the spear as it struck his mailed breast, he wrenched it from the Guambo's grasp; then, quickly turning, received the chief upon its point. It was all done so rapidly, and with such consummate skill and unflinching courage, that Mac's military ardour was fired, and, regardless of anything else, he cried:

'Bravo! Well done, Marona!'

Marona heard the generous cheer, and, with an answering shout, sprang forward as though to attempt our rescue. But evidently the odds were too great, the chances too desperate, for at Mac's deprecating cry he checked himself. The Guambos were rushing

upon him from all sides, and in another moment he must have been overwhelmed. Turning in the nick of time, he parried the blows of those who were within reach, and, with a parting call, disappeared through the lofty portal, leaving us stunned and helpless in the enemy's clutches.

CHAPTER XXIV.

DEARLY WON.



WE were not long kept in suspense as to what was to be our fate. The chief, though badly wounded, was still conscious, and as his warriors bore him past into the chamber which we had so uncere- moniously vacated, he looked savagely at us. The sight of his white prisoners seemed to madden him. The scowl on his face grew more vindictive; he muttered some terse command, and we were forced forward in front of him.

On entering the chamber, however, our guards turned abruptly to the left, and we found ourselves descending a flight of steps. We had not noticed these before in the pitchy darkness of the little room. A creepy sensation came over me as I realised that we were being taken to some horrible dungeon in the innermost recesses of the fortress. My brain began to whirl, and I should have fallen had not the savages held me up.

The steps led down to a long, low, and narrow passage, which we were made to traverse at a run. Then came more steps, at the bottom of which was

a curious circular chamber with dome-shaped roof, and at the opposite side a narrower doorway even than the one by which we had entered. Through it came a ray of light—daylight.

The air, too, was fresher, and under its influence and the hope begotten of that precious glimpse of the sun's light—which I never expected to have seen again—my spirits partially revived. Despair gave way to wonder. But this again quickly changed to dread on perceiving what we were coming to. The narrow doorway gave access to a kind of open terrace skirting the rock on which the fortress stood. A deep and wide chasm separated this rock from the mountain itself. It was as though some huge convulsion of nature had broken off this extremity of the rocky spur from the main cliff, which towered up hundreds of feet in front of us, and descended hundreds more to the bed of the torrent flowing between.

An involuntary exclamation of horror escaped my lips as I saw the leading Guambo approach the edge of this gulf and then apparently step off into space. I expected to hear a scream and a heavy thud. But nothing happened, except that a second savage followed and disappeared like the first—we were proceeding in single file—and a third likewise. Then came my turn. I shrank back, but the savage behind pushed me forward, and I now saw that the descent was not, as I had supposed, perpendicular. It sloped steeply to a ledge some ten feet below, and a rude sort of ladder resting against the slope made it quite easy. I got down without any difficulty, and obeying a sign from one of the Guambos, stood aside to allow the others, with Mac, to follow.

While waiting and wondering what was going to happen next, my eye was caught by a dark, tunnel-like opening in the cliff-wall opposite. I also noticed that a narrow bridge spanned the intervening gulf. It was such a very frail-looking structure, however, that the mere thought that I might have to cross it made me feel faint and dizzy. Luckily my attention was quickly diverted by the arrival of Mac and the rest of the party.

No sooner were we all assembled on the projecting ledge than one of the Guambos stepped on to the bridge and walked gingerly across. He was followed by two others; and then, to my dismay, I saw that I was expected to go next. It would have been less difficult to have followed the first man, for at each crossing the flimsy bridge swayed and creaked more than at the previous one—at least, so it seemed to my overwrought senses—and by the time the third man had gone over my nerves were totally unstrung. Mac saw and understood my dilemma.

‘Cheer up, old man!’ he cried. ‘It’s stronger than you imagine. Look straight before you and not downwards, and you’ll get across all right.’ Then, just as I had screwed my courage to the sticking-point, and was about to place my foot upon the bridge, he added grimly, ‘Though, for the matter of that, one death’s as good as another, I dare say.’

At these words and the sight of the frightful depth, which unavoidably caught my vision as I looked where to place my feet, I recoiled once more. But only for an instant; for, becoming impatient of my delay, two or three of the savages rushed forward

with the evident intention of pushing me on to the bridge by force. This was too dreadful to contemplate, and roused me to take the plunge at once. For the purpose of crossing the chasm one of my hands had been released, and gripping the rope of raw hide which was stretched from cliff to cliff on one side of the bridge, I started on my precarious journey. How I got across I don't know, for the frail structure swayed and pitched with every step I took, so that I thought each would be my last. I seemed to die a hundred deaths before at last I reached the farther side, and sank exhausted in the entrance of the tunnel.

Mac came next, his great weight causing one of the poles to snap in mid-passage, and sending a sickening thrill through me as I listened—for I durst not look. But mercifully the others held firm, and he arrived all right, though looking paler than ever I had seen him. The five remaining Guambos crossed without mishap, their lithe, cat-like tread apparently causing but little strain to the bridge in comparison with our slower and heavier motion.

My right hand had been rebound while waiting, and Mac's was quickly served in like manner. Then we were marched onward again in the same order as before, the tunnel being the exact counterpart of the one we had already traversed; but after proceeding some twenty or thirty paces it widened out for a little distance ere suddenly coming to a full stop.

Half-dazed as I was, I only felt a stupid sort of wonder as to what our swarthy janitors would do next. They appeared not to be at all disconcerted, however. One who carried a torch held it aloft, while two others lifted what looked like a heavy crowbar from a kind

of rack cut in the side of the tunnel. At the same time another savage, a sort of petty chief, who directed the others, stooping down, beat the rock on the opposite side with the palm of his hand. This loosened a small slab about a foot square, which, dropping out, exposed to view a narrow, wedge-shaped aperture. Into this the end of the bar was speedily inserted, the chief and the man who bore it grasping the other end. Then, at a word from the former, all three began to push the lever from them in the direction we had come. As they did so a perpendicular slit about four feet long gradually opened in the face of the solid-looking rock, and slowly but surely a large slab of granite began to slide back in its well-cut groove, revealing the entrance into some mysterious chamber.

‘Our tomb!’ thought I, a clod shiver running down my spine at the horrible notion.

Curiously enough, this sudden return to full consciousness of our position, instead of further paralysing me, had exactly the opposite effect. All my powers of thought and action were restored as though by magic, and I determined to make one more desperate effort to escape the cruel death designed for us ere it was too late; for once that ponderous stone should close behind us I knew resistance would be futile.

My first endeavour was to try and free my hands. I could feel that the thongs had not been tied so tightly as before crossing the chasm, and I hoped to be able to work them loose. Fortunately the Guambos, recognising that Mac was their most formidable charge, had taken less care in readjusting my bonds, and, to my joy, I soon found that I could stretch them sufficiently to withdraw my right hand.

One of the Guambos had preceded us into the cavern, and was apparently engaged in lighting it up with torches of some kind, to judge by the strong light which now proceeded from the aperture. The latter, however, being at right angles to where we stood, and the Guambos not allowing us to approach it closely until their preparations were completed, it was of course impossible for us to see into the chamber.

The delay, however, was fortunate for us. It enabled me to work loose both of my hands; so that when at length the order was given to move on, I once more had control of those useful members, though I took care to disguise the fact until such time as a favourable opportunity might present itself for employing them to advantage.

‘Good heavens!’

The exclamation burst from my lips involuntarily as, stooping down to enter the low doorway, a sight I shall never forget met my view—a sight so dazzling that for a time I could scarcely comprehend its significance. Before me was a lofty and spacious hall—no other word would describe it—brilliantly illuminated by huge flambeaux. These were fixed into high pillars, and their light shone down upon and was reflected from a most bewildering accumulation of gold and silver.

Such a sight was more than human mind could grasp instantaneously; and as I stood half-dazed upon the threshold, gazing in blank astonishment, I was jostled aside by those who followed. Then Mac’s voice, as he too beheld the marvels of that Aladdin’s treasure-chamber, roused me from my semi-stupor, and stepping within, I saw the strangest sight of all. Ranged on

either side of the vaulted hall were rows of statues wrought in gold, and set upon benches hewn from the solid rock.

‘Look!’ I cried, in my excitement. ‘Here are the images of all the Incas! Marona spoke truly.’

‘Ay,’ exclaimed Mac; ‘and there, too, are the golden vases filled with precious stones from their palaces at Cuzco!’

Glancing in the direction he indicated, I saw not only vases, but ornaments and vessels of every conceivable size and shape, many of them beautifully embossed with the figures of birds and animals, and all of purest gold. There were also weapons of steel, iron, and copper, mounted in silver and gold and set with jewels.

Intoxicated with the sight of all this priceless treasure, we actually forgot for a brief space how we came to be there, or that we were miserable captives, destined in all probability never to leave that secret hall again—either alive or dead.

Our happy forgetfulness, however, did not last long. We were rudely awakened to the stern realities of the situation. In our infatuation we had wandered into the middle of the treasure-chamber, unrestrained by the Guambos, who, strangely enough, seemed quite content to watch us from the entrance. All at once a peculiar sound caught our ears—a sound which caused us to face about with astonishing celerity. The stone door was being moved!

‘Back! Fools that we are!’ cried Mac.

‘Back, for our lives!’ yelled I as, realising the situation, we both leapt towards the opening.

Opening! ‘Closing’ would be a more appropriate

term, for already the ponderous block was half-way along the groove. How quickly and silently the savages must have slipped out while our backs were turned; and now how strenuously they were labouring to lever the door! Once closed and the wedge inserted, we knew that no earthly power—short of gunpowder or dynamite—could ever again move that slab from the inside. Realising this, we also realised the necessity of instant action, for unless something could be done, and done at once, to prevent the trap from closing its mouth upon us, we were lost indeed.

Luckily my hands were free and my wits clear at that momentous juncture; and while poor Mac, fuming and raging in impotent wrath and despair, was vainly tugging at his bonds, I seized a golden vase—the first thing I could lay hold of—and hurled it into the space which still remained between slab and rock-wall, between tomb and outer world.

‘Bravo! Well done!’ cried Mac. ‘Now cut my bracelets. Quick!’

I had already snatched up a dagger for that purpose; but ere I could use it the Guambos thrust out the obstructing vase, and continued to work the slab into position. A few inches only remained, and then it would be closed upon us for ever. With frantic haste I dropped the weapon, and turning, seized a bar of solid gold from the nearest heap.

‘Quick—quick! for heaven’s sake!’ cried Mac as, poising the bar aloft, I steadied myself an instant for the fateful throw.

Time was pressing—urgently, terribly pressing—yet to aim true was not less important. If I failed to block that groove, to stop that steadily closing door,

I sealed my own and my comrade's fate beyond hope of redemption. But conscious—acutely conscious—as I was of the consequences involved in that throw, my nerves were never steadier, my mind was never calmer. With unerring aim I flung the ponderous missile down upon the groove-bed; and the soft, unalloyed metal, wedging itself tightly in between slab and rock-jamb, effectually prevented any further closing of the aperture.

A prodigious sigh of relief burst from M'Cormick, and a yell of rage from the Guambos, at the success of my effort. The heavy and now shapeless ingot could not be displaced until the lever was reversed and the huge slab worked backward again so as to enlarge the opening—a precious interval we did not waste.

CHAPTER XXV.

BURIED IN BULLION.



QUICK as thought I snatched up the ancient dagger and hacked asunder my comrade's bonds, little recking the lacerations inflicted on his wrists thereby. A few cuts and scratches, however, were of slight consequence compared with the pressing exigencies of the moment. Our liberty, our lives, our *all* depended upon the use we made of that brief reprieve.

'Thanks, old man!' was Mac's curt acknowledgment as the severed thongs flew from his straining muscles.

Another instant and the freed but bleeding hands had grasped the nearest statue and dragged it from its pedestal. But even Mac's gigantic strength was unequal to the task of lifting that mass of solid gold. He looked at me; and interpreting his thoughts aright, I sprang to his assistance. Together we dragged the ponderous image to the exit, hurling it into the widened aperture at the very moment that our captors withdrew the obstructing ingot.

To be thus again balked of their cruel purpose was maddening to the savages. Throwing aside all caution,

and completely changing their tactics, they made no further effort to close the door, but uttering a fierce yell, leapt one after another through the opening, their apparent object being either to drive us into the farthest extremity of the hall or to slay us out of hand.

With equal alacrity, however, M'Cormick and I retreated behind a heap of treasure, and snatching up the first weapon that came to hand, stood resolutely at bay. What I had chanced upon was a kind of short-sword, similar to those used by the Romans of old; while Mac's was a heavy club or mace of iron, inlaid with gold. But it was unfortunate that the need of some adequate weapon had obliged us to fall back from the entrance, which otherwise we might have held without difficulty; whereas now we were compelled to face overwhelming odds of four to one.

Brief as was the interval between their inrush and the sight of their levelled spears within a few feet of our bodies, there was yet time for many thoughts to flash through our minds; and, strange to say, the one uppermost in mine was as to what had become of our comrade Dick Stavely, and whether his spirit had preceded ours to the spirit-world, and would be there to greet ours when this death-struggle was over—for it seemed hopeless to expect any other outcome of so unequal a contest.

With every nerve and muscle at its highest tension, grimly we stood behind our strange breast-work—a breastwork (oh, irony of fate!) composed of gold enough for a king's ransom—gold in solid bars and ingots, gold in vessels of chased design and cunning workmanship, and silver, wrought and unwrought. But our weapons, though deadly enough at

close quarters, were not adapted to withstand an onset of spearmen, and we only averted impalement by springing backward beyond their reach. This, however, only afforded a temporary respite; and at a word from their leader the Guambos divided, four turning on one side of the treasure-heap and four on the other.

‘Now Heaven help us!’ cried Mac, swinging his club aloft, and preparing to sell his life dearly if he could not save it.

For myself, the instinct of self-preservation imbued me with a sudden impulse, and quick as thought I sprang upon the quondam breastwork. But, alas! the lighter vessels and ornaments which formed its uppermost tier gave way beneath my weight, and down I fell in the general wreck upon the farther side. Amidst the clang and clatter of the metal, I fancied I heard a groan or two proceeding from the base of the heap; but if so, the sounds were lost in the almost simultaneous ring of steel and crashing of skulls as my stalwart comrade withstood the onset of his foes and brought down his heavy mace upon their heads. Scarcely had I time to note, as I struggled to my feet, that the Incalan armour had once again proved effectual to turn the hostile spears, and that M’Cormick still fought on, apparently uninjured in the murderous fray, when a noise which drowned all others burst upon our ears—a noise so strange, so loud, and so terrific that we all, assailants and assailed, stood for a moment transfixed with fear and astonishment. It was as though a hundred batteries of artillery had come rumbling overhead, and suddenly halting, discharged their contents simultaneously above us.

One moment we stood aghast in the very attitudes in which we chanced to be as the thunderous sound occurred—the fierce and swarthy Guambos with lances poised, and Mac towering aloft like some ancient gladiator beset by wild barbarians, his club raised in deadly menace. One moment only, and then we were all hurled to the floor by the shock which followed. Chaos and darkness succeeded, many of the statues and vessels of gold and silver falling from their places, and the flambeaux being overturned and extinguished. Half-stunned, and partially buried in the already deranged treasure-mound, I lay for a time incapable of action, yet conscious of some terrible convulsion of nature—some fearful earthquake—being in progress.

When at last I regained full possession of my senses, I found M'Cormick dragging me out from amongst the overturned vases and other treasures towards the entrance, whence alone there came a gleam of light. The ground still trembled beneath us, but my first thought was of the Guambos.

‘Where are the fiends?’ I asked.

‘Gone, thank goodness! Scuttled like rabbits through that hole!’ answered Mac, pointing with his club to the half-closed trap.

‘That’s a good riddance, at all events,’ I said. ‘I suppose they were mightily scared?’

‘And no wonder,’ responded Mac; ‘it was a terrible earthquake. I myself feel pretty weak about the knees yet, I can tell you.’

‘Nevertheless, it came very opportunely for us,’ I said. ‘We should certainly have been overwhelmed but for this lucky diversion.’

‘Ay; but we’re not out of the wood yet—or rather

the mountain,' said Mac, correcting himself, and keeping a sharp lookout on the entrance while speaking. 'These earth-tremors are rapidly subsiding, and the wretches may pluck up their spirits and return at any moment.'

'All that are left of them, you mean. I heard more than one skull crushed by your club.'

'Ay; I slew the head-man and another, but there are plenty more to take their places,' answered Mac, edging nearer to the entrance in readiness for any attempted rush.

'Why not barricade the doorway?' I suggested. 'We've material in abundance. And then we could have a little peace.'

'Do you propose to reside here indefinitely, old man?' asked M'Cormick rather querulously.

The prolonged strain was evidently telling upon him, though he pluckily pretended to make light of the situation.

'No,' said I, rising somewhat unsteadily from my seat on one of the overturned statues; 'by no means. But it's just a toss-up which returns first, the earthquake or the Guambos, and in either event I don't see that we could be in a safer place than this.'

'I believe you're right, old chap,' replied Mac apologetically. 'If we attempt to leave it we shall only be out of the frying-pan into the fire. Unless Marona succeeds in obtaining help we're done for, anyway.'

'Certainly, we shouldn't have much of a show for our lives, as they say out West, if we tried to make a bolt of it.'

'Then the sooner we commence barricading the

better, so lend a hand with this image; it will make a good foundation.'

Together we managed to drag the overturned statue on which I had been sitting towards the entrance. Then we piled the bars and ingots of gold from the treasure-heap on the top of it, filling up the narrow space from side to side. We worked without intermission until the opening was almost blocked and there was no longer any danger of the cave being rushed.

'There now, we can take it a little easier,' said Mac, plumping himself down upon the oblong pile of gold and silver bars which formed the base of the almost demolished treasure-heap.

Scarcely, however, had the words left his mouth when a terrifying sound—half-moan, half-groan—made him spring up again even more quickly than he had sat down, for it seemed to come directly from beneath him.

'Mercy on us! what's that?' he cried, spinning round and surveying the innocent-looking bullion with undisguised amazement.

'It's very strange,' I said, grasping my sword, 'but I thought I heard groans there before. Perhaps'—

My supposition as to its being one of the slain Guambos coming to life again was cut short by another moan, even louder and more disconcerting than the previous one. Mastering the impulse to retreat, I stepped to my comrade's side.

'There's some one beneath those bars or I'm a Dutchman,' I said. 'Let's investigate.'

'By all means,' responded McCormick, quickly recovering his usual *sang-froid*—'though I wish we had

more light,' he added; 'we've barricaded that out as well as the enemy.'

'Yes,' I said. 'It's rather gruesome.'

In less time than might have been anticipated under the circumstances, we had removed a whole tier of ingots, but without result. The remaining pile looked as solid as ever.

'Umph!' exclaimed my comrade. 'I could have sworn the noise came from here and nowhere else. It's very strange.'

'Very,' said I; 'but sound travels far. Suppose we try the next heap?'

As though deprecating this suggestion, the moan was repeated in more lugubrious tones than before. We started back.

'Gosh! that was close to us,' cried Mac. 'We're on the right scent, anyway. Off with another tier!'

Setting to work again in the semi-darkness, we lifted bar after bar of the bullion before noticing anything unusual. Then, as we rested a moment, we distinctly heard something or some one move.

'Hist! what's that?' I exclaimed.

'Heaven knows! A match—strike a match!'

Luckily I still had a number of wax-vestas loose in my pocket, and speedily striking one against the flat of my sword—for I had snatched up the latter at the first alarm—I held it over the remains of the treasure-pile. The first thing that the flickering flame revealed was a coffin-shaped receptacle formed of the brick-like ingots. Our last effort, by removing many of the bars which chanced to form the lid or cover, had exposed to view this unsuspected chamber. And what was our astonishment to see therein the

recumbent figure of a man—a man securely bound and gagged! We were still more amazed, however, when the uncertain light of the vesta revealed to us the dress and features of the corpse-like occupant.

‘Why, good heavens, it’s Dick!’ I almost yelled.

‘Dick—Stavely? Impossible!’ cried Mac, bending over me to get a better view, for I had dropped on my knees at the head of the cell.

‘Yes, my word! you’re right,’ he added. ‘It is the skipper, sure enough—and alive, too! See, he moves!’

So saying, Mac first pulled the wooden gag from our old comrade’s mouth, and then lifted him bodily out of the cell, while I lighted another match. Poor old Dick, how white and ghastly he looked by the light of the vesta—his eyes closed, and his head resting against Mac’s shoulder—such a contrast to the erstwhile hale and hearty ‘skipper’ of the *Argo*!

‘He’ll come round—he has only fainted,’ said Mac. ‘Stand back and let him have more air.’

‘If only we had a drop of brandy, or even water, to give him!’ I said.

‘Yes; water we *must* have—and quickly, too!’ answered Mac.

‘Water—water!’ feebly gasped our unlucky comrade at that moment, partially opening his eyes.

Eager and anxious as we were to comply with that piteous appeal, we neither of us could think how it was to be done. Water! Where was there any water?

‘Ah, I have it!’ suddenly exclaimed Mac. ‘The gorge—there’s plenty of water in the gorge.’ Then he paused, and added in a different tone, ‘But how to reach it?—that’s the question.’

I made no reply for a moment or two. I was thinking deeply. It was not only that the cliff was high above the river, but the earthquake having apparently subsided, there was the probability that the Guambos would return in force before any means could be devised for obtaining the water. All at once an idea struck me. Why not destroy the hanging bridge and prevent the Indians from recrossing?

‘Mac,’ I almost screamed, ‘take your axe and cut the cables which support the bridge! I’ll attend to Dick. Or, stay,’ I added, as the coolness of the request, by reason of the hazardous nature of the task, impressed itself upon my mind; ‘lend me the implement and I’ll do it myself.’

‘No, you won’t, old man; I’m stronger than you, and can do it in less time. Yes, it’s a good idea,’ he added, helping me to tear down enough of the barricade to enable him to crawl through the opening.

It was comparatively easy to pull down the ingots, and in a very few minutes Mac was able to wriggle himself through and commence work upon the bridge. His vigorous blows resounded along the passage as I hurriedly unfastened the thongs that bound poor Dick’s wrists and ankles, and soon an extra loud crash apprised me that the rickety structure was demolished.

But hark! What were those other sounds which mingled with the rattle of the falling bridge?

CHAPTER XXVI.

FIT FOR THE GODS.



LAYING my half-conscious charge down by the opening, so that the fresh air could fan his face, I scrambled out into the passage. And there a wild scene met my view, and wilder yells assailed my ears. On the near side of the chasm stood Mac, axe in hand, and on the farther side a crowd of Guambos. The latter evidently had returned just in time to witness the fall of the bridge, and they were giving vent to their anger and chagrin in the wildest cries and gesticulations, some of them even hurling their spears across the gorge in their impotent wrath.

‘Bravo! Well done!’ I cried as, parrying or dodging the missiles, Mac quietly backed out of range into the passage.

A minute later we both were inside the wonderful hall again, and hard at work constructing a rope out of the strips of raw-hide which lately had bound the three of us.

‘Too short, I fear!’ exclaimed Mac as the last thong was attached.

‘Ay. What shall we do now?’

My comrade thought for a minute or two, and then he cried, ‘I have it. Didn’t you notice those gold chains encircling the necks of the statues?’

‘To be sure—the very thing!’ I exclaimed, springing to my feet.

It was a simple matter, even in the dark, to collect as many chains as we required, the statues being placed at regular intervals along the sides of the chamber. There also was no lack of suitable vessels, and we soon had one attached to the end of our composite cable. The only thing that troubled us was how to draw the water in face of the hail of spears and other missiles which we felt sure would be hurled at us across the chasm.

To our surprise, however, when cautiously we emerged from the treasure-chamber there was no sign of any enemy. The Guambos, evidently thinking it was as impossible for us to get out as it was for them to get in, had gone—at least, so we surmised—to report the destruction of the bridge to their wounded chief. Anyway, we were able to lower our water-vessel unmolested.

It was fortunate that the Guambos had cleared off, for it took us some time to fill our bucket. The latter caught in a cleft of the rocks, and it was only after the third attempt that we succeeded in hauling up our golden ewer nearly full of the precious fluid. Then how eagerly we hastened with it to poor Dick, and with what joy we watched its reviving influence as first we administered a refreshing draught, and afterwards bathed his temples, face, and hands!

‘Thanks—thanks,’ he murmured, taking a deep

breath after every word. 'I'm better now. But what has happened? Where are we?'

'We're corralled—that is,' said Mac, hastily correcting himself, 'we're quite safe for the present. So you'd better take another drink, and then lie down and have a good sleep;' and he filled with water a beautiful golden goblet we had picked up, and held it to the colourless lips.

Meanwhile I was searching about for some of the largest urns to hold a good store of water, for we thought it would be well to take advantage of the absence of the Guambos to draw as much as possible. All at once I came upon a row of large silver flagons standing on a stone bench in an alcove near the left of the entrance. They were different from anything else we had seen. Their mouths, too, were stoppered and sealed. Lifting one of these from the bench, I found it was very heavy.

'My goodness,' I exclaimed, 'here's a find!'

'What is it?' cried Mac.

'Liquor of some kind,' I said, shaking the bottle to make sure.

'Then bring it here and let's sample it.'

'We've got to open it first,' I said, endeavouring to remove the seal with the point of the old dagger.

The wax, or rather cement, was almost as hard as adamant, but at last I snipped it off; and then the wooden stopper came out without any difficulty, and with a report like that of a champagne cork.

'That sounds refreshing!' exclaimed Mac, holding out his goblet to catch the liquor as it came fizzing from the mouth of the flask.

'If it's only as good as it looks—and sounds—we

shall be lucky,' I said. 'But be careful,' I added as Mac raised the cup to his lips; 'it may be some deadly poison for all we know.'

Mac sipped it very gingerly, and smacked his lips.

'If it's poison,' he said, 'it's a very alluring one. Champagne's not a patch on it!'

'Let me drink it, *please*,' came in hoarse and feeble accents from our hapless comrade on the floor.

'With pleasure, old chap, if we only knew that it was not harmful.'

'I know,' answered Stavely, rousing himself by an effort; 'I can smell it here, and I'm sure it's what the Incas used to drink. I read all about it in that book Mr Younger lent us.'

'What—*sora*? ' I asked.

'Yes, that's the name. It's made from maize. Just let me taste it.'

I handed the goblet to him, wondering within myself at the revivifying effect which even the sound and smell of the sparkling liquor seemed to have.

'It's all right, I believe. Anyhow, I'll chance it,' said Dick; 'it can scarcely make me worse than I am;' and grasping the cup in both hands, he drained it to its dregs, regardless of my protests and Mac's muttered caution not to be too venturesome.

For a minute or more we stood helplessly gazing at our rash comrade, half-expecting to see him suddenly collapse or seized with mortal rigours. But, instead, he visibly brightened. His voice gradually recovered its bold, cheery tone, his pulse grew full and strong, and soon he was sitting up asking and answering questions, and apparently as well as any of us. It was astonishing.

‘My word! there’s something very potent in that wine—and not for evil, either,’ exclaimed Mac; ‘so pass the bottle round, old man.’

‘By all means,’ was my ready response, for I too was feeling dreadfully fagged and faint for want of food and rest.

‘It’s the finest stimulant ever I drank,’ said Dick. ‘No wonder the use of it was forbidden by the Incas to the common people.’

‘It’s fit for the gods!’ cried Mac, tossing off a brimming cupful.

‘Ay, but consider its age,’ I said, refilling the goblet. ‘You can’t get wine, or spirit, two or three hundred years old every day.’

‘Nor bottled in silver flagons and quaffed from golden goblets, either!’ observed Mac hilariously.

The liquor evidently was very strong, especially for tired and debilitated persons; so, taking the hint, I only swallowed half a cupful, passing the remainder to Stavely, who quickly finished it. Then, completely worn out as we were, all three of us surrendered to the wooings of Morpheus, and soon were sound asleep.

From what Dick had told us, it seemed that, after being overpowered and captured by the Guambos, he, in company with many other prisoners, was carried off to this mountain fastness. Evidently, however, the Indians had heard of the white men’s quest for hidden treasure, and after a heated discussion amongst the chiefs or head-men, he was separated from the Incalans and taken to the secret hall—doubtless with the same grim purpose as in our case, of letting him perish amidst the treasures he was believed to covet.

At first, like Mac and myself, he was fascinated by the magnificence of the treasure-chamber and its amazing display of wealth—standing spell-bound at the sight. But when he perceived that the intention of his captors was to leave him in that gilded vault to die by inches, he naturally resisted, struggling and fighting like a madman, until knocked senseless by a blow on the head from behind.

On recovering consciousness he was horrified to find himself lying face upwards in pitchy darkness, unable to move hand or foot, and that when he tried to raise his hand it came in contact with something hard. Then he realised that he was entombed in a sort of golden cairn, the ingots being built over and around him in a solid mass. His frantic but futile efforts to break out of the suffocating cell fortunately resulted in his swooning away again, and he knew no more until aroused by the clatter of falling urns and vases when I leapt upon the pile to escape the spears of the Guambos.

Thus it came about that we all three were united once more—but under what desperate circumstances! We had found, too—and when we least expected it—some of the rarest and most valuable treasures of the ancient Peruvian empire. Yet how they mocked us! True, we had not discovered the particular riches—Atahualpa's ransom—which we had come in search of; but we had found, or rather been allowed to look upon, treasure of even greater value.

And though this was done only from a refinement of cruelty—to embitter the death to which we had been doomed—it was in a sense a justification of our expedition, for it proved that treasure of fabulous

magnitude and value really existed in these ancient halls of the Incas. Nevertheless, how that word mocked us now! TREASURE!! What was the good of treasure which we could not remove, much less barter? How thoroughly we realised its intrinsic worthlessness when we found ourselves shut up with millions of pounds' worth of it, and yet for which we could find no better use than to barricade the entrance to our prospective tomb! 'Treasure! How gladly would we have exchanged every particle of the silver for a substantial meal, and every ounce of the gold for the certainty of rescue!

Such were the thoughts which occupied my mind, if not the minds of my comrades, as one by one we awoke from our refreshing slumbers, and, all too quickly remembering where we were and what had happened, lay brooding over our unhappy fate.

McCormick was the first to make a move. He rose and walked to the narrow entrance, peering through it and listening intently. Presently he returned, and seating himself on an overthrown statue, said:

'I wonder what on earth has become of the Guambos! I can neither see nor hear any sign of them.'

'It's very strange,' said I; 'but I can't say I'm sorry.'

'You may depend upon it, it bodes us no good, old chap. They're up to some mischief or other, no doubt.'

The words were scarcely spoken ere a slight noise attracted our attention. It seemed to come from the passage.

'Hist!' cried Dick, who was wide awake, and seemingly as well as any of us after his long and refreshing sleep. 'Hist! there's some one coming.'

Mac was on his feet in an instant, and snatching up his battle-axe, stood guard over the entrance. I followed suit with my short-sword, and Dick groped about for a weapon for himself. Thus waiting and listening, presently we heard the noise again.

‘By George, I believe they’re trying to restore the bridge!’ exclaimed Mac in a hoarse whisper.

‘Then we must stop them at all hazards,’ I responded, starting to climb the barrier.

‘Hold on a moment; after me, please. You’ve no protective armour;’ and without more ado, the ex-soldier pushed past me into the narrow exit.

Before either of us could get through, however, a sudden flash of light and an almost simultaneous cry of astonishment from Dick arrested us. Turning to see what had happened, we were amazed to find the large cavern in what to our eyes, so long accustomed to the darkness, seemed a perfect blaze of light.

‘Good heavens! what’s the meaning of this?’ exclaimed Mac, blinking like an owl.

‘Look! look! The sun-god!’ ejaculated Dick, shading his eyes with one hand, and pointing with the other to a large burnished symbol of the sun fixed under the vaulted roof of the hall.

We had noticed this amongst the other wonders of the place when first we entered. Its bright disc, reflecting the light of the flambeaux, had formed a conspicuous object, high above the statues of the Incas and the piles of treasure. Now, however, it shone with supernatural lustre—a real luminary—lighting up every corner of the spacious hall, and scintillating over the treasures around.

Whence came this sudden effulgence—this miracu-

lous transformation from rude symbolism to apparent reality? It was startling and awe-inspiring in the extreme. We were none of us superstitious, yet we stood amazed and dumfounded at the strange phenomenon.

CHAPTER XXVII.

SURPRISES.



UDDENLY the spell was broken by a noise behind us; and turning about, we saw our barricade being torn down and figures scrambling over the breach.

‘Stop them! Stop them!’ shouted M’Cormick, whirling his axe aloft as he rushed to bar the passage.

Simultaneously Dick and I sprang forward in support. But ere our weapons clashed with those of the invaders, a warning cry burst from their leader’s lips.

‘*Tente! tente! Amigos!*’ (‘Hold! hold! Friends!’), he cried.

‘Marona! Why, it’s Marona!’ we exclaimed, in tones of heartfelt joy, as, recognising the Inca captain, we seized his outstretched hands and shook them rapturously.

The situation had changed indeed. One moment we were preparing to fight to the death, the next clasping the hands of deliverers. In place of fierce Guambos we were surrounded by the well-appointed troopers of the Inca’s bodyguard, whose arms and accoutrements glistened in the mysterious sunlight.

But how was the change effected? What had brought about the happy transformation? These were the questions that flashed through our minds as we glanced around, half-fearful that it was all a vision—that we were but the victims of some strange hallucination, and that presently we should awake to the stern realities of the situation.

Our fears and anxieties, however, were speedily allayed. In a few brief words, which Mac interpreted for Dick's and my benefit, Marona told us how he and his men came to be there. It seemed that, after making good his escape from the fortress, he fortunately fell in with a scouting party of his countrymen, and these conducted him to the nearest outpost of the Incalan army. Luckily, too, Huanco himself was with the advance-guard near by, and so soon as he heard of our plight he collected some of his best-mounted cavalry and despatched them to our assistance, Marona himself taking command of the little force. By dint of hard riding they reached the ancient fortress just as the Guambos were about to throw a fresh bridge, which they had constructed, across the gorge.

‘Why, could not they be content to let us die of starvation?’ we asked.

‘*Carambo!* They knew that our army was advancing, and feared you might be rescued,’ was the captain's answer.

‘Ah! So they wished to make sure. But, tell us, how did you get over the gorge?’

Marona thereupon explained that the savages were so taken up with their work that they did not at first perceive the approach of his little force. He therefore dismounted some of his men, and leading them quickly

to the main entrance of the castle, carried it with a rush, almost before any alarm could be given. What few savages were on guard in the entrance-hall made but a feeble resistance. Completely taken by surprise, they fled into the interior of the building and down the secret passage. Marona and his men followed close upon their heels, and reached the narrow platform as the Guambos were endeavouring to make fast the cables of the bridge. Seeing that there was no time to complete their work and escape across the gorge, the savages doubled back to where a sort of stairway led down the near side of the precipice. Thereupon Marona, surmising that his white friends would be imprisoned beyond the chasm, made no attempt to stop or molest the fugitives, but immediately concentrated all his efforts on completing the fragile structure as quickly as possible.

The rest we know. No; there was one thing that required explanation—the sunlight streaming from that golden image overhead. M'Cornick put the question to the Inca captain, who smiled, and gave some order in the Quichua tongue to one of his men. The latter immediately turned and disappeared through the entrance. A second or two later, while we were wondering on what errand the trooper had been sent, the light suddenly went out, plunging us into almost Stygian darkness.

‘Heavens! what’s the meaning of this?’ cried Dick apprehensively.

‘Only some little pleasantry of Marona’s, I fancy,’ answered Mac, calmly taking out a vesta and striking it—to the great consternation of the troopers, who had never seen such a thing before.

Evidently their captain didn't quite relish this turning of the tables. He blew his whistle, and in an instant the hall was a blaze of light once more, the feeble glimmer of the vesta being lost in the bright effulgence of the sun-god.

'Wonderful!'

'Marvellous!'

Such were the exclamations that broke from our lips at this seeming miracle.

'*Vamos!*' cried Marona, leading the way out of the cavern, and beckoning to us to follow.

We did so, and soon found ourselves at the mouth of the tunnel, where it widened out near the brink of the gorge. Here our leader stopped, and pointing to a small niche in the side of the passage, almost on a level with the top of his helmet, cried, '*Mira!*'

We looked up, but for a few seconds could distinguish nothing in the deep shade of the rock-wall—nothing but the dark niche.

'Ah! what is that?' exclaimed Mac at length, raising his hand and reaching into the crevice. 'Why, it's a metal knob of some kind,' he added, grasping the article.

'*Tiras!*' ('Pull!'), cried Marona.

McCormick pulled, and instantly the light streaming from the hall into the passage went out.

'*Rechezas!*' ('Push back!'), ejaculated the captain.

McCormick pushed back the knob, and the light shone out again as bright as ever.

'My word, it's magical!' exclaimed Dick.

'I wonder if Marona can explain how the effect is produced—what causes the marvellous effulgence,' I said.

‘I’ll ask him,’ replied Mac. ‘There must be some wonderful contrivance for conveying light from outside.’

This was so; and the Inca captain described the mechanism of it, while his men strengthened the fastenings of the bridge and secured the approaches beyond. There was of course no time for details, but we learnt that the seeming miracle was produced by an ingenious arrangement of reflectors. The knob, actuating a lever, opened or closed a shutter in a cone-shaped metal shaft, which communicated with the outer air. This shaft, with its trumpet-like mouth and highly burnished sides, caught and conducted the sun’s rays directly on to the polished disc of the cunningly wrought image within, concentrating and intensifying them to such a degree as to cause the dazzling effect which had so astounded us. The whole contrivance was a striking proof of the mechanical skill of the ancient Inca craftsman.

‘There is one question I should like you to ask,’ I said when Mac finished interpreting Marona’s information, ‘and that is, why did not the Guambos make use of this convenient mode of lighting the cave when they brought us here, instead of employing torches?’

Mac gave an approving nod, and put the question to our cicerone, who in effect replied that, like many more valuable secrets, this was known only to the Inca nobility; and he added that the Guambos only discovered the treasure-chamber through the accident of an earthquake having dislodged some of the stones covering the entrance to the underground passage.

By this time—and but a few minutes had elapsed since the arrival of our rescuers—the bridge was

reported 'safe and reliable' even for 'the white men.' Nevertheless, none of us seemed in a hurry to utilise it. Its appearance certainly was not calculated to inspire confidence. Indeed, it looked, if possible, more cranky than the old one. But in reality this was not so. The materials of which it was constructed were perfectly fresh, retaining all their native toughness and elasticity; so that steady nerves alone were needed to ensure a safe passage.

But, alas! there was the rub. Our nerves were by no means in the best of trim after what we had gone through, and it was with painful misgivings that at last I made the venture.

'Bravo, Phil!' exclaimed Dick as I stepped gingerly on to the swaying fabric.

'Yes, that's right—give us a lead, old fellow!' was Mac's approving comment; and thus encouraged, I walked carefully and tremblingly over the bridge, clutching the slender hand-rails with desperate energy, and looking straight before me. I dared not cast a single glance downwards lest dizziness should seize and overcome me. As it was, I almost staggered up the incline on the farther side, gladly grasping the hand which one of the Incalans held out to help me.

'Hurrah! he's over all right. I'll try it next,' cried Dick, hastening after me, as though fearful that his courage might fail if he lingered another moment.

'It's perfectly safe,' I called out encouragingly. 'Don't look down, and you'll be all right.'

The next minute Dick was safely by my side. But meanwhile Mac had turned back into the passage; and when I called to him to 'Come along,' he just faced about for a moment and replied:

‘All right, old chap—so soon as I’ve secured some memento of this Aladdin’s palace.’

As he disappeared into the cavern, a shrill whistle sounded high above the muffled roar of the waters in the gorge below. It was evidently a danger-signal from the Incalans, and Marona answered it immediately. Then, turning in the direction M’Cormick had taken, he shouted, ‘*Volves, señor! Volves prontamente!*’ (‘Come back, sir! Come back quickly!’), and without further loss of time, sprang nimbly over the bridge to where Dick and I were standing.

But he did not stop a moment. Merely beckoning us to follow him, and crying, ‘*Guarda! guarda! Los Guambos!*’ he rushed on down the rough stairway that led to the foot of the cliff.

I looked at Dick, and Dick at me, wondering what could have happened to cause Marona to make so precipitate a retreat. It was decidedly puzzling, after the gallant manner in which he had so recently succoured us. We stood for a moment, dumfounded; and then, as if by one impulse, we both cooed at the top of our voices to Mac.

The echoes had scarcely died away when an answering cry came back to us, and almost simultaneously our venturous comrade reappeared at the mouth of the tunnel. In his hand were two or three of the golden chains from the necks of the statues, and in his belt a couple of daggers set with sparkling jewels.

‘Come on! come on!’ we cried. ‘There’s not a moment to lose;’ and posting ourselves firmly at the side of the gorge, we each extended a hand to aid our comrade up the slope.

Gauging the situation at a glance, Mac unhesitat-

ingly committed himself to the bridge, and despite its ominous creakings, reached us safely.

‘Thank heaven,’ I exclaimed, ‘we’re over that once more; and come what may, I’d rather face it than risk that bridge again!’

‘And I!’ ‘And I!’ assented Mac and Dick as all three of us stepped briskly down the steps.

We little knew what it was we had to face at the bottom.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

PRODIGES OF VALOUR.



First the noise of the water as it plunged over its rocky bed prevented us from hearing anything else; but as we neared the bottom of the cliff we could distinguish the clash of steel and the cries of combatants.

‘My goodness!’ exclaimed Mac, ‘things seem to be pretty lively down there.’

‘That they do—worse luck!’ said I, gripping the short-sword, which was my only weapon.

‘Then for’ard on—for’ard on!’ cried Dick, carried away by the excitement of the moment, and half-imagining he was following hounds down the steep slopes of Peckforton—‘for’ard on!’

A minute later, on turning a projecting crag, we came in view of the conflict which was raging below, and the sight sobered even Stavely. The Incalans evidently had been surprised or outmanœuvred in the absence of their leader. One portion of their force had been driven into the mouth of the gorge, where it was completely hemmed in by hosts of savages; while the remainder of the squadron was maintaining

a gallant but hopeless fight against overwhelming numbers in the open plain beyond.

In vain did Marona, who, with the dismounted troopers, was already on the scene, urge his men to renewed efforts. Even the mounted men were hampered by the roughness of the river-bed, their horses stumbling over boulders or plunging into holes; and as for those on foot, we could see that they were continually being swept off their feet by the swiftness and force of the current. As we gazed for a moment, amazed and irresolute, we saw the farther troop prepare to charge. Evidently they meant to make one more desperate attempt to relieve their comrades in the gorge.

‘Now for it! Now’s our chance!’ cried Mac. ‘Follow me!’ and running a little farther down the path, he sprang on to a narrow ledge of rock which ran parallel with the torrent, some ten feet above it, and leading towards the entrance of the ravine.

‘Where are you going?’ I cried. ‘Are you mad? We shall all be lost!’ But he only waved his hand in the direction of the combat, and hurried on.

‘Anyway, we shall be lost if we stay here,’ cried Dick; ‘so for’ard on!’

It seemed the only thing to be done, and on we went after our leader—though I could not help noting the ominous change in Stavely’s voice. Its usual confident ring was lacking, and my own spirits fell lower in consequence. We both were expert mountaineers, however, and soon caught up Mac as he scrambled rather awkwardly over some loose pieces of rock.

‘Bravo!’ he exclaimed. ‘I thought you wouldn’t desert me. You’ve guessed my plan, of course.’

‘No, indeed, we’ve not; but we may as well all die together,’ I said.

‘Pooh, man! don’t be faint-hearted. We’re not cornered yet.’

‘Then we never shall be,’ I replied; ‘so push along. Where you lead we’ll follow.—Eh, Dick?’

‘Ay, live or die, we’ll stick together,’ acquiesced Dick grimly; ‘though why we’ve left the path I can’t imagine,’ he added *sotto voce*.

Amidst all the din, Mac’s quick ears caught the words.

‘Look!’ he cried. ‘What sort of a chance should we have down there, do you think?’ and he pointed to the struggling mass below, where men and horses, swords and spears, helmets and eagles’ plumes, all seemed mingled in inextricable confusion.

We looked and shuddered involuntarily, for at that moment several dead or wounded combatants and a couple of ham-strung horses were swept out of the throng and over the whirling rapids into the abyss beneath.

‘No,’ continued Mac; ‘I should have been mad to have led you into an inferno like that. My idea is to get round the enemy’s flank, and then seize the first opportunity to descend and capture some of those loose horses. The rest would be easy.’

‘Capital, my word! And here’s the place,’ I said as we arrived at a spot where a steep, shaly slope led directly down to the river.

‘Yes, and *now’s the time*. See—here they come!’ responded Mac, with emphasis, pointing towards the

advancing cavalry. 'My goodness, how they ride!' he added as, with a ringing shout and lances levelled, they broke into a gallop.

'It's Balaklava over again!' exclaimed Dick, becoming quite excited once more, as we watched the plucky charge of the Incalan horsemen.

They were but some sixty lances, and the Guambos were fully six hundred strong, yet they rode as stoutly and steadily as though the odds were reversed.

'Now be ready,' cried Mac. 'There'll be plenty of riderless horses directly.'

But for a minute it seemed as if our soldier-comrade was out in his reckoning. The savages recoiled before the fierce onslaught, opening a wide lane into their very midst, down which the squadron dashed almost unopposed.

'Hurrah! They break; they run!' shouted Dick, quite carried away by the excitement of the moment.

I glanced at Mac. He was standing as rigid as a statue, his whole attention riveted on the stirring scene. Dick's outburst seemed to rouse him from his half-fascinated gaze.

'No; it's a ruse. They're doomed—they're lost!' he cried.

And even as he spoke we saw the lane close up behind the gallant band, cutting off their retreat; while almost simultaneously, and with a fierce roar of exultation, the savages rushed in from all sides. Too hampered any longer to use their lances with effect, but nowise daunted, the troopers drew their swords and fought their enemies hand to hand. At this critical juncture we heard, shrill and clear above the din, Marona's whistle. He evidently was rally-

ing his men for a fresh effort. No great distance now separated the two forces, and if only they could effect a junction they still might hope to cut their way through the throng.

With the instinct of a born leader, Mac saw that the time for action had arrived.

‘Come on—follow me!’ he shouted, plunging down the slope with break-neck speed.

‘Come on!’ I echoed, catching something of the soldier’s ardour.

‘Ay. Charge, Berkley, charge! On, Stavely, on!’ cried Dick, his spirits bounding aloft once more, as together we dashed down the incline.

At every step the loose, shaly ground gave way beneath us, so that we descended in a perfect avalanche of stones and dust; the noise and clatter of the former, together with our excited shouts, rising even above the din of battle, and striking terror into the enemy’s ranks, for our number was effectually concealed by the impenetrable dust.

Encouraged by this bit of luck and the fact that the river, though wider at this spot, was only knee-deep, we dashed across. There was no one to oppose our passage, and ere the Guambos could recover from their momentary panic we raised a mighty cheer and rushed upon them.

Wielding his ponderous battle-axe with as much apparent ease as though it were a cricket-bat, Mac forced a passage through the wavering mob, dealing death and destruction to any who ventured to oppose him, while Dick and I followed as best we could in his wake; the impetuosity, or rather perhaps audacity, of our charge carrying all before it until

we had penetrated to within a few yards of the sorely embarrassed troopers. Then, alas! our victorious career ended. Finding that we were entirely unsupported—in fact, merely the three prisoners they had recently captured and disarmed—the Guambos quickly rallied, and in another minute we were as badly beset as any of the poor fellows we had endeavoured to relieve.

What followed I scarcely know, having for the most part only a very confused recollection of the *mêlée*. One incident, however, stands out clear enough. We had become somewhat separated, and having been forced to my knees, I was giving myself up for lost, when a savage whom Mac had hurled from him pitched violently against me, knocking me backwards and falling over me.

This incident saved my life at the expense of the Guambo's, for the unlucky wretch received a couple of spear-thrusts intended for myself, and never moved again. At the same moment a weapon he was holding flashed before my eyes. It was one of the revolvers taken from us in the ancient fortress!

Amazed though I was, I did not let slip such a chance as this. As a drowning man will clutch at a straw, so did I clutch at that precious pistol. In the twinkling of an eye I had its shapely butt firmly in my grasp. The weapon was still at half-cock, and had never been discharged, having doubtless been regarded merely as a charm or totem by its ignorant possessor.

To cock and fire the revolver into the faces of the swarming savages was but the work of a moment, and its effect was almost magical. Probably never

before had they seen or heard the discharge of fire-arms—at least at such close quarters—and they fell back or fled in dismay. The Incalan cavalry were quick to take advantage of the opportunity, and with loud shouts charged through the opening.

‘Bravo, Phil! Now’s your chance. Mount, mount!’ cried a voice which I recognised as Dick’s.

Turning my head, I saw that he had somehow managed to possess himself of one of the loose horses, and was riding it in the rear of the troopers. At the same time another horse came trotting towards me, and it was this animal he was endeavouring to draw my attention to. I did not require much prompting. Already I had regained my feet, and springing forward, I caught the bridle deftly in my hand and stopped the frightened charger. Just as I was about to leap into the saddle, however, I saw Mac come staggering towards me with only the broken helve of his axe in hand. His helmet was bulged in, and he appeared to be half-stunned. One hurried glance at Dick, who had reined in beside me, one moment’s hesitation, and then my mind was made up.

‘Here you are, old chap!’ I cried; and seizing Mac’s arm, I pulled him to the horse which I was about to mount. ‘Up with you—quick!’ I said; and giving the rein to Dick, I held the stirrup with one hand, and with the other assisted the half-dazed man into the saddle.

‘Now jump up behind him!’ cried Dick. But it was too late. The horse was restive, and the Guambos, rallying from their temporary panic, were closing in again. Another moment and we all should be lost.

‘Away! away!’ I cried; and striking the horses

with my hand, I started them off, regardless of Dick's protestations. It was no time for ceremony.

Then turning to face the foe, I fired the remaining charge of my revolver and awaited death. It seemed imminent enough in all conscience as I drew the trigger: the Guambos were not ten paces away. But my star was in the ascendant that day. The bullet struck down the leader—one of the principal chiefs—and once more the savages halted and wavered before the deadly fire-tube! Luckily, too, twilight had come on, thus heightening the effect of the discharge by displaying the flash.

Notwithstanding all this, my life would not have been worth five minutes' purchase, seeing that my revolver was now empty, had not a most opportune and totally unlooked-for diversion occurred. Suddenly, above the turmoil of the waning fight, rose the noise of fiercer strife—the thunderous sound of charging hoofs—the shock of impact and the crash of spears! Then came a mighty roar—the mingled cries of triumph and despair—the swelling cheer that preludes victory.

'Huanco! Huanco!' is the shout that cleaves the air, rising above the battle-din, above the swish of hurtling swords and ring of steel on steel!

It is enough. The mob gives way. It breaks and flies in desperate rout.

'For life, for death, their flight they ply' before the resistless cavalry of Incala.

One moment I stand dumfounded, my senses in a whirl of strange emotions. The next I shout, 'Hurrah! Huanco to the rescue!' and fainting, fall before the rush of panic-stricken fugitives.

CHAPTER XXIX.

PRISON OR PARADISE?



RÁCIAS Á DIOS!

The words seemed to come to me from the misty deep; yet the voice, rich and musical, that uttered them thrilled me with tender joy. Where was I? What had happened?

Like one awaking from a troubled sleep, I awoke to consciousness and stared about me. I was lying on a luxurious couch, surrounded by plants and flowers of gorgeous bloom and sweetest fragrance; while graceful palms above my head shaded from the too ardent rays of a glorious sun, and vine-clad trellises festooned with purple grapes protected from the mountain-breeze.

As I lay basking in the genial warmth and bright surroundings, and wondering what earthly paradise I had reached, a shadow fell across my face. Glancing up, I met the gaze of a beautiful woman. A woman! Nay, surely a queen of women—Unini!

Yes; those glorious eyes, that witching smile, could belong only to the daughter of the Inca—the lovely maiden we had rescued from drowning in the mighty

Ucayali! With a cry of joy, I endeavoured to rise and greet her. But the effort was too much for me in my weakened state, and I fell back upon my couch swooning.

When consciousness again returned, another face, another form, was bending over me—Dick Stavely's. In his hand he held a silver goblet, and as I looked up he pressed the vessel to my lips and bade me drink. Obeying, I drained the contents speedily, for I was very thirsty and the liquor like nectar.

'Bravo! That'll soon set you right, old chap,' said Dick cheerily. 'I've been giving the same to poor old Mac, and drinking gallons myself; and it has done wonders for us—the finest pick-me-up I ever knew.'

'It's wonderful stuff,' I assented, feeling greatly revived. 'But, tell me, Dick: where are we? and how did we get here? I—I thought I was killed!'

'Well, old man, you certainly *ought* to have been—and Mac and I too—by all the rules of the game! But we weren't, you see. We were rescued in the very nick of time by Huanco—though it has been a near squeak for you and Mac. You've both had fever. Indeed, I've had a touch myself,' he added.

'Umph! But you haven't told me where we are,' I persisted. 'I thought I saw Unini! Or—was I dreaming?'

'Unini is here, and I'll send her to you in half-an-hour's time with some refreshment. But you mustn't talk any more now—you are too weak;' and with this dictum, he began to move away with that uncompromising air which doctors at times see fit to assume.

But I was not to be foiled. 'Then this is Incala?' I hazarded.

'No; but it's on the way there—a sort of Happy Valley, or natural sanatorium, in the bosom of the mountain.' And he might have added, 'The place selected for our detention during the Inca's pleasure.'

But it was not until some time afterwards that we discovered that such was the case—though Stavelly suspected as much when endeavouring to fence my inquiry. It, however, gradually became patent to us that virtually we were prisoners; and by questioning our good nurse and guardian angel, Unini, we learnt the reason of this. It was a sacred obligation with the Indians never to divulge to any foreigner the secret of the hidden treasures—a secret they have kept from one generation to another ever since the Spanish conquest. They firmly believe that at some future day they will recover their long-lost empire, and that then the treasure will be exhumed and all their ancient glories revived.

Unini, however, assured us that her father and his principal nobles were not so deluded as to believe this unreservedly; hence the tacit consent to our enterprise. Besides, it was considered next to impossible that we could discover any of the treasure, much less remove it. When, however, it became known that we had actually been immured in the secret hall of the Incas, and subsequently had made our escape, there was great excitement amongst the Indian population. They cried out that they were betrayed, and demanded that the white men should be put to death—according to the ancient fiat that no foreigner should see the treasure and live. Consequently, to

quell the outburst and prevent any attack upon us, the Inca issued a proclamation that it was the Guambos who were to blame for attempting to incarcerate us in the subterranean treasure-chamber; but in order to avert any serious consequences from their ill-advised action, he would take immediate steps to prevent our leaving the country and disseminating the knowledge we thus had gained.

Atitacama was as good as his word. His fleetest runners met the escort which was taking us to the capital—for Huanco had lost no time in despatching us thither—and we were carried into this little valley to await the Inca's pleasure. Luckily, Unini no sooner learnt our fate than she hastened with a small retinue of her attendants to minister to our wants; and, as Staveland assured me, it was owing chiefly to her unremitting attention and devoted care that we—and especially Mac and I—pulled through.

The valley in which we found ourselves, being at about the same elevation as the one where we had left Pedro and the others, possessed a delightful climate—a sort of perpetual summer. When we were sufficiently recovered to explore it, we found it to be a veritable paradise, nestling in a hollow of the giant mountain whose summit formed the elevated tableland of Incala.

One end of the valley almost abutted on the narrow but well-made road which led to the plateau, while the other terminated in perpendicular cliffs of red sandstone. Down the centre of these towering cliffs there leapt a magnificent waterfall, which, striking against a jutting crag midway, completed the remainder of its thousand-feet descent in showers of foam and

sparkling spray. Then, gathering itself together, the seething water found anon a deep and ample pool, whence, soothed and pacified, it flowed unruffled through the vale.

At its lower extremity the valley closed in until only a deep and narrow gorge remained as outlet for the river, affording likewise the sole means of ingress or egress for visitors by a pathway cut in the base of the cliff. There was no permanent population of this unique retreat, but a formidable guard was stationed at either end of the defile, so that no one could pass in or out without the Inca's orders.

As gradually we realised all this, our paradise became transformed into a prison—a beautiful one, indeed, but still a prison. At first, as health and strength came back to us, we had revelled in the balmy air and glorious sunshine, the luscious fruits and cool retreats. We never seemed to tire of strolls beside the limpid, fern-fringed brook, or picnics 'midst the groves of orange-trees and lemons—perhaps because Unini too was present! But now that we had quite recovered our normal health and spirits, we began to yearn for liberty of action. True, we had discovered one goodly pile of treasure, and also the futility of trying to profit by the knowledge; but as yet we had completely failed in the main object of our enterprise—the finding of Atahualpa's ransom. After recent experiences, however, we were not so sanguine as to believe we could obtain any very marked success in that line; for even if we succeeded in locating the gold, it was difficult to see how we could carry away any considerable quantity of it.

Nevertheless, anything seemed preferable to inaction. Luxury and rest were all very well while convalescent; but strong and hearty, we chafed under the enforced idleness, and were continually planning ways of escape. Remembering the faithful Pedro, too, we wondered if he still remained where we had left him; or whether, in despair of ever seeing us again, he had returned with his companions to the launch and essayed to navigate it back to Pará.

This, however, we did not think likely, and we determined to take the first opportunity of escaping and making our way to the islet. Then, if fortunate enough to find our coloured friends alive and well, we did not anticipate much difficulty in recrossing the Ceja and gaining our launch. And once again aboard that tight little craft, we felt that we could descend the Pachitea in defiance of the Tapuyas; for, besides having a stronger crew, we should have the current with instead of against us.

Our idea was to return to Nauta, at the mouth of the Ucayali, and then turning west, ascend the Marañon as far as the Pongo of Manseriche, where navigation is interrupted by tremendous rapids. Here we should have to decide upon our future course of action. Two schemes suggested themselves to us, each of which had its peculiar attractions. One was to refit the *Argo* and proceed to explore the Rio Negro, the Madeira, or some other of the Amazon's mighty tributaries. The other idea was to leave our vessel in charge of Pedro, and making our way overland to Lima, endeavour to obtain a grant of land in the Ceja de la Montaña for colonisation purposes. In the event of our succeeding in this latter undertaking—and it

was the one upon which Mac and I had pretty well set our minds—we purposed returning to England to get together a body of suitable emigrants, and afterwards conduct them to the magnificent region we had found—the Ceja de la Montaña—whose climate and scenery have been described as perhaps the most delightful in the world.

It was an ambitious project, and could we but realise it we felt that it would more than compensate us for our disappointment in having to abandon what was originally the main purpose of our expedition. But there was one great difficulty in the realisation of this new and fascinating scheme—a difficulty that seemed almost insurmountable—and that was the question of finance. Capital we must have—capital in abundance—but how were we to obtain it?

Ah! that was the question which damped our enthusiasm—the question which none of us could answer.

CHAPTER XXX.

‘SAUVE QUI PEUT!’



‘T’S all right, old chap. I followed your advice with the greatest success. We shall soon be out of this.’

Such was M’Cormick’s greeting as I returned one evening from an unsuccessful attempt to find a practicable way out of the valley. The unconscious sigh with which my big comrade ended his speech belied the outward satisfaction of the words. But pretending not to notice this, I replied :

‘That’s good news. I thought it would be wisest to take the princess entirely into our confidence.’

‘Yes ; my word ! I never saw such a change as came over her when I told her of our colonisation scheme. Her recent coldness and hauteur vanished like mist before the sun, and now she’s her own sweet self again. I almost wish she wasn’t,’ added poor Mac very fervidly, turning his face away.

‘Well, but you haven’t told me yet *how* we’re to get away,’ I said impatiently, feeling somehow rather annoyed at my comrade’s emotion.

‘The plan’s simple enough,’ he responded, controlling

himself by an evident effort. 'There is to be a sort of triumph for Huanco and his troops when they return to Incala, and Unini has undertaken to obtain permission for us to attend the ceremony. She is confident that her request will be granted, and for the rest we of course shall have to depend upon our own efforts. No; there is one thing more the princess will see to,' added Mac, 'and that is, that we are mounted on the best horses her stables can provide.'

'Well done, Unini!' was my heart-felt exclamation; 'that's worthy of your queenly nature!'

Unini was as good as her word. The Inca's permission had been obtained, and the night before the projected ceremony she invited us to a farewell supper in her pavilion. We were to leave the valley at daybreak, and although no actual discussion had taken place, it was tacitly understood that we should seize the first favourable opportunity of giving our escort the slip while *en route* for the capital. In all probability, therefore, this was our last chance for friendly converse and leave-taking ere a parting which might be for ever.

The feast was worthy of the Inca's daughter. Festooned with sweet-scented creepers, and decked with gorgeous flowers, the lofty saloon was like a fairy-palace; while Unini, attired in snowy white—her dark complexion and raven hair thereby contrasting all the more effectively—looked superbly beautiful. All her recent coldness and pride had disappeared, and in its place a tinge of sadness, both in voice and mien, added not a little to her resistless charm. Never will that image of grace and beauty be effaced from my memory!

Fortune favoured us, for the morning was thick and misty—a most rare occurrence in the favoured region of the Ceja. Each mounted on a superb horse, we took the position allotted to us near the centre of the cavalcade, feeling already as good as free. By mutual consent Mac had been constituted leader, his imperturbable coolness and readiness of resource, no less than his varied experience, peculiarly fitting him for the rôle.

The order of march at first sight seemed unfavourable to our project, but Mac quickly recognised its weak point. Half a squadron of cavalry led the way; then followed Unini and her retinue, with ourselves close behind; while another whole squadron brought up the rear. Just before reaching the narrow outlet of the valley Mac contrived to speak to Dick and me unobserved.

‘Watch and imitate my actions closely,’ he said. ‘Be alert!’

A minute later the head of the cavalcade entered the gorge. There was only room to pass in single file. The advance-guard gradually disappeared from view. Unini and about half her retinue likewise entered; but before the other could follow, Mac, who had been pressing close behind, pretending to be unable to restrain his horse, pushed in before them. Dick and I promptly followed suit, the frightened maids and lackeys drawing aside to let us pass. Thus we got into the centre of the party, which was evidently what our leader desired, judging by the pleased expression of his face when, on glancing round, he saw Dick and me close upon his heels. Our action did not pass unobserved by the rear-guard, but they, supposing

it to be the result merely of inability to control our mettlesome steeds, only laughed. A very few minutes sufficed to undeceive them.

The roar of the torrent drowned all other sounds as slowly we filed along the narrow path. At length we saw the opening in front of us, and caught a glimpse of the road leading to Incala. The latter lay far up the mountain slope to the right, but evidently Mac had no intention of travelling that way. Quickly turning in his saddle, he shouted back to us:

'Be ready! Left turn when you reach the road, and follow me!'

I was the last of the three, and the words barely reached me through the din of rushing water and the clatter of the horse-hoofs on the rocky path. But, far away in front, I saw Unini looking back at us as if conscious of the warning cry, and doubtless her woman's instincts told her that the parting was at hand. Lifting my hat and waving it above my head, I was rewarded by seeing her put the tips of her fingers to her lips and throw me back a kiss—at least I thought it was for me; but, with his usual presumption where Unini was concerned, M'Cormick evidently took the favour to himself, and it angered me to see him return the salutation.

But the time for action had arrived. Already Unini and her retinue were debouching upon the road and turning up the mountain to the right. In a few moments we should be clear of the pass. Gathering up our reins, therefore, we prepared for the fateful dash.

Our suspense did not last long. On emerging into the open we saw what we should have to encounter, and the sight was such as might well have shaken

our resolution. Drawn up across the bridge which spanned the river, and by which alone we could escape, was a double row of foot-soldiers, evidently belonging to the garrison of the small fort commanding the mouth of the pass. Through or over these, therefore, we must force a passage. To have hesitated would have been to court disaster, for, unarmed as we were save for our stout riding-canes, our only chance was to take the picket unawares. But luckily there was no hesitation about our leader.

'Close up! Charge!' he shouted, his stentorian voice making the rocks resound as, striking spurs into his horse, he wheeled sharply to the left.

'Charge! Charge!' echoed Dick and I, racing to get even with him.

The distance to be traversed was so short that we were upon the enemy almost before they realised our object. Surprised and confounded by the suddenness of the onset, but few of them offered any resistance, and such as did were swept aside or hurled over the low parapets into the torrent below.

'Hurrah! Hurrah!' we cried, in exultation, on finding ourselves safely across the bridge.

Then glancing back, and seeing that as yet we were not even pursued, we steadied our horses into a more lasting pace, well knowing that their powers of endurance would be severely tried ere we could attain safety. Mac's tactics had proved most successful. The troopers lost much precious time ere they could push their way past the frightened retainers and give chase, Unini's piebald palfrey appearing to add to the confusion by rearing and plunging across the roadway. The last glimpse I caught of her will not

easily fade from my memory. A sudden gleam of sunlight, piercing the mist, cast a sort of halo about her; and when a moment later a turn of the road intercepted my view, it was as though the curtain had dropped upon some lovely vision, yet leaving it fixed indelibly upon the mind.

For a long time we galloped on in silence save for the clatter of our horses' hoofs upon the dusty road, two of us, at all events, feeling heavy at heart as the excitement of the charge subsided and we realised more fully the unselfishness and nobility of her from whom we had parted—perhaps for ever! It was the more mercurial Dick who at length diverted our thoughts by observing that there was no longer any sign of the pursuers, who, as the mist cleared away, had been seen in the distance more than once during the first ten or twelve miles of our flight.

'Then we'll slacken speed,' said Mac. 'We're not far from the pass; and once through that, we shall have more to fear from stray parties of Guambos than from our friends of Incala.'

An hour later we were bivouacked beside a stream flowing into the dividing gorge from the northward—the direction in which our route to the Ceja and the island-refuge lay. While our horses greedily browsed the herbage growing beside the water, we rested and refreshed ourselves with the food and wine Unini's forethought had provided, not forgetting meanwhile to keep a sharp lookout for our pursuers in case they still were on our track. As for the Guambos, they were not likely to trouble us until we got clear of the pass.

It was refreshingly cool in the shade of the rocks

which towered above us; but we dared not linger too long, and soon we were threading our way up the narrow gorge which led to the *mesa* or tableland we should have to cross. Once there, we knew not how soon we might encounter bands of savages, and therefore we reserved our horses' powers as much as possible by merely walking them up the rugged trail. When near the summit Mac scouted a little in advance; and presently we saw him beckoning us onward.

'It's all right, he cried as we got nearer; 'not a sign of a Guambo anywhere.'

'Hurrah!' exclaimed Dick. 'I wish they were always of so retiring a disposition.'

'Ditto,' I assented, pushing on to where Mac was surveying the landscape.

Beyond the *mesa* the country was like a billowy sea, hill stretching beyond hill, and ridge over ridge, while towering above the whole were the lofty, snow-clad summits of the Andes. One prominent spur of the nearer Cordilleras arrested the eye from its peculiar conical shape. It evidently was an extinct volcano. There was something about it, too, which looked strangely familiar; and I noticed that Mac's gaze, like my own, had become riveted upon it. Suddenly a thought flashed across my mind.

'Why, that's the very spur we bivouacked upon the night before that terrible fight,' I exclaimed—'our first encounter with the Guambos!'

'What—our Majuba Hill!' cried Dick.

A grim smile hovered about our leader's mouth for a moment ere he responded. Probably he was

thinking of the horrible struggle he had with that ferocious savage on the brink of the crater.

'You're right, my friends,' he said at last; 'it's the point we've to make for. Forward!' and simultaneously striking his horse's flanks, he led off at a sharp canter for the distant landmark.

'Do you think we'll reach it before dark?' asked Dick, urging his horse alongside of mine.

'No,' I replied; 'we shall be lucky if we get there by to-morrow night. That spur is seventy or eighty miles away if it's a yard.'

'Good gracious!' he exclaimed, 'it doesn't look twenty in this clear air;' then after a pause he added, 'I suppose we shall skirt the foot of the mountain instead of taking the higher pass. It is longer, but it will be much easier for our horses.'

'Well, as you came that way with the Guambos, you ought to know,' I said; 'and you must take the lead so soon as we approach the spot. I dare say Mac is not prejudiced in favour of the crater path after his thrilling experience there last time.'

Our conversation was stopped by the individual referred to calling back to us:

'No talking, please. Indian file; and keep your eyes and ears open.'

The warning was not uncalled for, as the plain was becoming dotted with clumps of cactus, which, for all we knew, might conceal lurking savages. Nevertheless, we succeeded in reaching a sheltering nullah soon after sunset without encountering an enemy of any kind. A spring of clear water and abundance of grass made it an ideal camping-ground, and decided us to stay there till morning. Hobbling

our horses, we ate what little food remained in our wallets; and then, taking it by turns to watch, we passed the night undisturbed save by mosquitoes and other voracious insects.

For most of the following day our route lay through a comparatively fertile though hilly and rugged district. Numerous streams, gullies, and patches of woodland necessitated careful scouting; but the former ensured plenty of water for man and beast, and the latter not only afforded good browsing for the horses, but likewise plenty of coealeaves for ourselves. We had learnt the value of this plant from the Indians, and took care to fill our pockets with leaves at every opportunity. So great are the sustaining powers of the plant that by chewing the leaves we were enabled to push on all day without suffering from either hunger or thirst.

At length we reached the difficult country running up to the base of the main range, and through a break in the trees the conical spur seemed almost to frown down upon us. We were traversing a wooded valley which Dick said he remembered passing through when captured by the Guanibos, and from which a little farther on a deep defile led to the higher ground beyond.

Suddenly our ears were assailed by the most terrific yells, and from the cover of some bushes a number of savages burst upon us without a moment's warning. Luckily our startled horses leapt aside so quickly that the Indians missed their aim, and instead of driving their long spears through our bodies, as they had intended, they succeeded only in wounding the poor horses. Dick's

was not seriously hurt, but mine and M'Cormick's were badly gashed.

'We're done for!' I said as our stricken steeds limped painfully onward in response to bit and whip, while our luckier comrade galloped swiftly away.

Mac glanced at me with a peculiar smile about his firm mouth, and then shouted after Dick at the top of his voice:

'Sauve qui peut!'

The cry acted upon our impulsive comrade like an electric shock. Recalled to a sense of duty and *camaraderie*, he pulled up his horse, and turning round, rode back again as quickly as he had fled.

'Awfully sorry!' he exclaimed, his face flushing crimson. 'I forgot your horses were disabled;' and, regardless alike of our protests as of the yelling mob behind, he took up the post of honour and of danger in the rear.

In this fashion we proceeded some little distance, when, just as we entered the mouth of the defile, Mac's horse fell dead from exhaustion and loss of blood. Mine too began rolling ominously.

'The game's up; save yourself, Dick!' cried Mac, springing to his feet—for luckily he had fallen clear of his steed.

'Never!' responded Stavely, who, like myself, had pulled up. 'We'll all die together if die we must.'

CHAPTER XXXI.

‘CORRALLED!’



T was a very pretty sentiment of Stavely's, and did him infinite credit, but it scarcely commended itself to Mac's indomitable spirit at that crucial moment.

‘Nonsense, man!’ he cried, quickly recovering his habitual confidence. ‘We haven't come to that yet. Your horse is fit and strong, and you'll serve us best by hastening to the islet for help. Bring back Pedro and the others with every weapon you can muster. Away before it's too late!’

There was something in the tone and manner, no less than in the words, of the quondam soldier which compelled obedience. Dick gathered up his reins and gripped his riding-stick.

‘And where will you be—you and Phil?’ he said, slowly turning his horse in the required direction.

‘Hiding in one of these gorges, perhaps. Make for the old crater. If we're alive we'll meet you there. Adieu!’

‘Good-bye!’ came the response as our comrade dashed away into the gloomy defile.

The sun had already gone down behind the lofty

Cordilleras, and the falling darkness afforded hope that we might be able to elude our pursuers; for as yet the latter were hidden from us, and we from them, by the angle of the gorge. There was, however, no time to lose if we wished to make another effort for life. At any moment the Guambos might reach the entrance of the pass, and then it would be too late to avoid capture or death.

'This way—*quick!*' I shouted, springing from my horse, and giving him a cut with the whip, which sent him hobbling after his rapidly disappearing fellow-equine—'this way!' and seizing my comrade's arm, I led him into a sort of crevice I had noticed in the rock-wall close at hand. Into this we squeezed ourselves just as the foremost Indians turned the entrance into the defile. Their fierce yells of delight when they saw the fallen horse seemed to pierce us through and through, so close were they to our hiding-place.

Then followed a death-like silence. They were listening to ascertain our whereabouts. We held our breath! But it was only for a moment, though it seemed an hour, so terrible was the suspense. The irregular footfall of my poor steed was plainly audible, and with howls of exultation, in which the main body, coming up, also joined, the savages rushed onward in pursuit.

'Thank Heaven!' was all that we could murmur as, cautiously emerging, we glanced around to see if any of the Indians lurked behind.

Being reassured on this point, we held a hurried consultation as to what was best to be done.

'Depend upon it, they'll soon return when they

find your horse is riderless,' said Mac. 'We'd better slip back to that dry water-course we crossed just before entering the gorge, and follow it up into the fastnesses of the mountain.'

'Right you are—make haste!' I cried.

But Mac required no urging, and I soon found that I should have my work cut out to keep up with him. At first the bed of the water-course was fairly smooth, and we were able to make rapid progress notwithstanding overhanging shrubs and creepers. But as we ascended higher and higher into the mountain it became well-nigh impracticable from another cause. Huge boulders and jutting ledges barred our passage continually, and were with difficulty surmounted in the deepening darkness. At length we were brought completely to a standstill by a perpendicular wall of solid rock.

'Umph!' exclaimed Mac, feeling with his hands the smooth face of the cliff. 'There's no climbing this, I fear.'

He was right. We could go no farther, for on either hand were unscalable cliffs; in fact, the water-course had degenerated into a mere rift or fissure of the mountain. By this time, too, it was pitch-dark, so that there was nothing for it but to remain where we were until morning. Luckily there were no signs of our pursuers, and we could only surmise that my horse, relieved of its burden, had led them so long a chase ere they discovered it was without a rider that they were completely thrown out, nightfall preventing their recovering our trail.

Anyhow, we were too much exhausted by hunger and fatigue to greatly care what happened; and throwing ourselves down upon what felt like a bed of sand, we at once fell fast asleep. It seemed as though we scarcely had closed our eyes, so soundly did we sleep, when we were awakened by a shrill, discordant cry. For a moment we thought the Guambos were upon us, and springing to our feet, we prepared to sell our lives as dearly as possible. It was broad daylight, and boulders being plentiful, we each seized one in readiness to hurl at the foe. But nothing except inanimate objects met our gaze—the almost precipitous sides of the narrow chasm, the towering rocks and beetling crags—while silence deep as the grave brooded over all, and seemed to gag us with its spell.

We looked at one another with awed, scared faces, and our tongues refused to act, until—ah! what was that? A shadow fell across the chasm, while from above us came a sound as of some large object rushing through the air.

'Heavens! what's that?' I cried.

'Goodness knows!' responded Mac as, glancing upward, we caught sight of a gigantic bird swooping past.

'A condor!' I exclaimed, with a sigh of relief. 'See, there it is again!'

'Ah! What a fright it gave me!' said Mac. 'I thought some terrible missile was descending upon us!'

'No doubt the bird was looking out for his breakfast,' I responded, watching the vulture as he wheeled above us in majestic circles.

'He looks quite capable of carrying one of us off in his talons. But, hillo! what's this?'

My comrade stooped down, and taking up a handful of the sand on which we had been lying, examined it closely.

'Sand, I suppose,' said I inconsequently, returning to the fascinating contemplation of the soaring condor.

'Sand!' exclaimed M'Cormick suddenly in tones of great excitement. '*Sand!* It's *gold!* PURE GOLD!'

I turned and glanced at my comrade for a moment without speaking. 'Surely,' I thought, 'he's going mad. Hunger, fatigue, and disappointment have turned his brain!' But no; not a trace of madness was visible in the fine, steadfast gray eyes that met mine as he handed me the 'dust,' as he called it.

'Nonsense, man!' I was beginning; but the words ended in an exclamation of astonishment on feeling the weight of the sand-like grains which were poured into my open palm. *Gold it was, without a doubt!*

Under other circumstances, what a find this would have been! The bottom of the gully was covered with it for some yards in length—bushels and bushels of it. But now it seemed only to mock us, cornered as we were in that desolate region hundreds of miles from the nearest settlement, and with a pack of bloodthirsty savages on our heels. These disturbing cogitations were interrupted by another exclamation from M'Cormick, who was searching for the lode or lodes whence such extraordinary riches could have come.

'Here, Phil—come here!' he cried.

He had mounted a detached piece of rock at the extremity of the chasm, and was peering down at something beyond.

'What is it?' I asked, clambering up beside him.

'Look!'

'Umph! Is that all?' I exclaimed in disgust, seeing nothing but a small, tunnel-like opening in the base of the cliff—a sort of rude culvert of Nature's own construction—where I had expected to behold at least a vein of solid gold.

'*All!*' repeated my comrade chidingly. 'Do you call that *all*? Why, it's where the precious gravel comes from—washed through this natural vent from some marvellous source within—mayhap the mother-lode of all the Andes! The'——

'Hist!' I exclaimed as again the cry of the condor, like some bird of ill-omen, pierced the still air, though apparently farther away.

'It's only that wretched vulture,' said Mac impatiently, his thoughts completely taken up by our wonderful discovery—the magic spell of *gold*.

And as he spoke he slipped cautiously down into the narrow channel between rock and cliff-wall in order to examine the aperture more closely.

For my own part, I felt too nervous and apprehensive to be elated about the riches beneath our feet. I was thinking of the implacable savages who, in all probability, were at that very moment searching for our trail, if not actually upon it.

'Come and let us try to find some way out of this blind-alley,' I said, 'or we may be caught like rats in a trap.'

'Pooh, my good fellow! You're letting yourself be influenced by that old superstition of the condor being the winged guardian of the mountain mines, the precursor of'——

'Death and destruction!' I cried, as at that very instant a fierce 'Who-oo!' resounded through the gorge, and from my elevated position I could see a host of Indians advancing towards us.

'Ah, the Guambos!' exclaimed Mac, with but little show of excitement. 'Well, thanks after all to that vulture, they're too late for a kill in the open!'

'What do you mean?' I asked, in amazement, descending hastily from my perch.

'To retreat into this tunnel,' he said. 'Come along. No hard-pressed fox ever found a better earth;' and dropping upon hands and knees, he commenced crawling into the dark, burrow-like opening.

'Stay!' I cried. 'Where does it lead to?'

Mac stopped and backed himself out again.

'To life and liberty, I hope,' he said. 'There's a glimmer of light in the distance. But you go first,' he continued, drawing aside to let me pass, 'and then you'll see for yourself.'

We were hidden from the approaching savages by the block of rock, but another and louder whoop apprised us of their close proximity. Evidently it was no time to stand upon the order of our going; and without further hesitation, I threw myself upon the golden gravel and crawled as rapidly as possible into the tiny passage, Mac following.

But for the knowledge that quick and certain death awaited us if we lingered in the gorge, nothing could have induced me to enter this drain-like tunnel. For

all we knew it might lead to the lair of a puma or other wild beast, and my heart fairly quaked with fear as I penetrated farther and farther into the mountain. At length the light grew more pronounced, the tunnel expanded into a roomy cavern, and we were able to stand up side by side and look about us.

'Ah! this is a little better,' said Mac; 'and the air is perfectly fresh and pure.'

'Ay; but we cannot live on air,' I objected somewhat querulously, for the gnawings of hunger were becoming almost unendurable. 'Besides,' I continued, 'what's to prevent those wretches from blocking up the entrance and entombing us for'——

'Hist! There they are!' exclaimed Mac, as a series of howls and yells came volleying down the tunnel and reverberating through the cavern. It was a terrifying sound, reminding one of nothing so much as the baying of a pack of hounds at the mouth of a drain or burrow in which a hunted fox has sought refuge from their eager jaws. Acutely did we realise what the sensations of the beaten animal must be.

'Push on!' cried Mac. 'Make for the light; there must be a bolt-hole where that enters.'

Groping our way onward as quickly as possible, we soon reached the extremity of the cavern, or rather the point where it again contracted into a mere conduit, some three feet high by two wide. But this time we had only to creep a short distance ere emerging into a huge open space—a vast circular shaft some hundred feet in diameter.

'Heavens!' I exclaimed, 'where are we now?'

'Where are we now?' came back the mocking response from across the opening.

It was only the echo of my own voice, but it was so clear and unexpected that we both started back in alarm.

'Ugh! This is very uncanny,' said Mac, advancing a step or two. 'I do believe we're at the bottom of the crater!'

He spoke in low, subdued tones; nevertheless, we distinctly heard the last word, 'crater,' solemnly repeated.

What contributed most of all to the weirdness of the place, however, was the faint, sepulchral sort of light, which made it impossible to see anything clearly. It came chiefly from an opening some fifty feet up the opposite side of the crater—for crater assuredly it was.

'That must be where the water flows in from some mountain torrent during the rainy season,' I said, pointing towards the spot. 'Couldn't we climb up to it and escape?'

'We'll have a try, anyway,' replied Mac; 'but first let us block up the passage behind us in case some of the Indians venture to follow.'

'By all means,' I said; 'though I scarcely think they'll attempt the feat of drawing the badgers from their hole!'

It was astonishing how quickly our spirits revived so soon as we saw, or thought we saw, a possibility of escape. Hunger and fatigue were forgotten as we hurriedly collected boulders from the channel, or fragments of rock, and piled them in the narrow entrance.

'There, that will effectually prevent any incursion of the enemy,' said Mac as we put the finishing touch

to the barricade in the shape of a huge block of volcanic rock.

Feeling temporarily secure, we sat down for a few minutes to rest and chew a few of the coca-leaves we had gathered and stowed away in our pockets when passing through the wooded valley on the previous day. Then, greatly refreshed by the wonderful herb, we proceeded to make as careful a survey of our surroundings as the semi-darkness would permit.

Clambering out of the channel which skirted one side of the area, we found ourselves on a kind of raised floor strewn with pumice and scoriæ of all shapes and sizes. Over this we stumbled towards the farther side, guided by the light streaming in from the opening already mentioned.

When we had gone about half-way we stopped and looked upwards. It was like looking up the shaft of a coal-mine more than anything else, and produced within us a sickening sensation as we realised the tremendous depth of the crater.

'Yow! What was that?' exclaimed Mac as something wafted the air in our faces as it flitted past.

'Only a bat, perhaps. But come along,' said I, fancying I heard voices at the barricade.

A howl of rage at that instant confirmed my suspicions, and caused us to hasten on, although we had little fear of the savages forcing an entrance.

'Stop!' cried Mac, suddenly seizing my arm in his vice-like grip. 'What's that?'

Another step and I should have plunged into a pool of water lying in the deep shadow of the rock-wall just below the opening.

'Thanks. My word! your eyes are better than mine,'

I said, drawing back from the dark, forbidding-looking pool.

But M'Cormick remained as if rooted to the spot, staring fixedly down into the smooth, water-hewn basin.

‘Look!’ he exclaimed in a strangely hollow voice, retaining his hold of me with one hand, while with the other he pointed to some logs floating on the water.

Concentrating my gaze upon the driftwood, I saw lying across it a startling object. It was a human skeleton! The skull was slightly raised, and the orbless sockets seemed in the faint light to be staring directly at us.

‘Ugh!’ I exclaimed, with a shudder. ‘It’s the wretch you threw into the crater—or at least what’s left of him.’

‘Ay,’ replied Mac, glancing at the perpendicular rocks around; ‘and he has got his revenge!’

Instinctively I realised the significance of those words.

‘What! Surely you don’t mean that we’re’——

‘Corralled! Lost!’ said Mac, grimly supplying the words my tongue refused to utter.

CHAPTER XXXII.

CONCLUSION, AND ILLUSION.



O wonder my heart sank within me at the ominous dictum, for well I knew the situation must be hopeless indeed when M'Cormick gave way to despair. We had been buoyed up by the hope that we should be able to scramble out by the opening which admitted the light; but, alas! the walls of the crater rose sheer from the pool as elsewhere, affording no semblance even of foothold for the first twenty feet or so. Indeed, it seemed as though they had been subjected to the action of water, so smooth and unscalable were they.

To add to our distress, too, the light, feeble as it was already, began sensibly to diminish; and as we wandered around our living tomb, vainly looking for some possible means of escape, we had to hold each other by the hand to avoid becoming separated or falling over obstacles. There was, however, one favourable circumstance—the Guambos appeared to have withdrawn from the tunnel. At all events we could hear nothing of them at the barricade. Nevertheless, when I suggested taking advantage of their

absence to try and escape that way, Mac shook his head.

‘No,’ he said; ‘it may be only a ruse to tempt us to our destruction. Though,’ he added a moment later, ‘there’s something very mysterious about both their disappearance and this increasing darkness. I cannot fathom it.’

‘Then you think there may be some connection between the two circumstances?’ I responded.

‘Who can tell?’ he answered. ‘Savages, like rats and other vermin, seem to be endowed with special means of detecting impending dangers. This noontide darkness may be the precursor of an earthquake or other violent convulsion of nature.’

Scarcely had he finished speaking when a flash of light illumined the crater, displaying and exaggerating all its weird profundity. Then followed a heavy roll of thunder, succeeded again by more flashes and thunderings. It was evident that one of those sudden and violent storms so common in the tropics was raging in the mountains above.

Suddenly a strange rushing noise mingled with the rumbling of the thunder, growing louder and louder each moment.

‘Heavens! what is that?’ I cried.

‘Water, by George! Down with the barrier!’ exclaimed Mac. ‘Quick, or we shall be drowned like rats in a hole!’ and jumping into the channel, he began tearing away the boulders and fragments of rock we had piled against the outlet.

Too late! With a roar and a rush like an express train emerging from a tunnel, the flood came pouring through the opening on the other side of the crater,

and plunging into the pool below, dashed down upon us with resistless force.

‘Look out!’ I yelled, scrambling out of the channel in the nick of time.

My comrade, however, was less fortunate. Linger- ing a moment too long in the endeavour to displace as many stones as possible, he was caught by the inundation and dashed against the rocks. Stunned and helpless, he must have been drowned had not I managed to catch him by the collar and pull him towards me. Then, turning him upon his back, I kept his face above water.

The bottom of the crater was already flooded to a considerable depth, and it seemed only a question of a few minutes at most before I too should be overwhelmed. Nevertheless, some instinct of self-preser- vation impelled me to make one more effort for life. Wading across the submerged area and dragging my insensible comrade after me, I strained my eyes in the endeavour to find some refuge from the remorse- less flood.

Higher and higher it rose, until just as I got within a few yards of the further limits of the volcano I felt myself being lifted off my feet. At that very moment, however, a prolonged flash of electricity once more illumined the awful cavern, displaying directly in front of me a great heap of——

Ah! what was it? Even in that crucial moment the appearance of the *débris* struck me as very remarkable. Before, however, I could determine what it was the flash had gone, leaving the darkness more intense by contrast. And, indeed, the composition of the heap was of very small consequence to me at that

moment compared with the promise it afforded of a temporary asylum from the turgid waters.

In endeavouring to gain a footing, however, I slipped and nearly lost my hold of Mac. But this turned to our advantage, for the sudden jerk and momentary immersion restored the good fellow to consciousness and enabled him to take care of himself. A minute or two later we both found ourselves struggling up what we supposed to be a fall of rubbish.

In our eagerness and anxiety to get beyond the reach of the ever-rising water, we at first were completely insensible to the nature of the material over which we clambered. It sloped towards the rock-wall, and all we wanted was to reach, if possible, one of the outcropping ledges above. As, however, the light began to improve, and our minds gradually recovered some measure of calmness, we became conscious that there was something very extraordinary about the pile. Instead of crumbling shale and cinder-like pumice, it appeared to be made up of very different material, to judge by the dull, metallic sound emitted when any of it rolled away beneath our feet.

Nevertheless, we were still too much concerned for our personal safety to think of stopping to examine the nature of the débris, our one aim and anxiety being to gain a refuge from the waters. At last we reached what appeared to be the highest point of the heap, and, to our dismay, it was far short of the desired ledge. But as if to compensate us in a measure for this bit of ill-luck, we observed that the volume of water pouring into the crater was sensibly diminishing, and that the flood had almost ceased to rise. The

light, too, continued to increase, and a few distant rumblings were all that remained of the recently raging storm.

‘Cheer up, old fellow!’ exclaimed Mac. ‘Things don’t look quite so bad after all. We’——

I heard no more, for exhausted nature had reached its limit of endurance, and I fell fainting into my comrade’s arms. When I regained consciousness he was bathing my temples with water from some vessel beside him.

‘That’s right,’ he said as I opened my eyes. ‘Now drink this;’ and placing a small silver flask to my lips, he made me swallow the contents.

It was all that remained of the potent liquid—the drink of the Incas—which Unini had given us, and which the far-seeing Mac had reserved for such an emergency as this. Under its influence I quickly revived. But on sitting up my eyes fell upon the encircling water, and an involuntary sigh escaped me at the recollection of our miserable plight. To my surprise, however, Mac gave a little laugh.

‘Truly, some folk are hard to please!’ said he enigmatically. ‘Here are we on the very spot we’ve so long been searching for, and in absolute possession of the treasure we came so far and risked so much to find, and yet’——

‘What do you mean?’ I asked, interrupting my comrade’s unusual flow of eloquence.

‘Mean!’ he repeated. ‘Why, the Inca’s ransom of course. Or at least,’ he added, correcting himself, ‘that vast portion of it which failed to reach his captors.’

‘What! the lost ransom?’ I exclaimed, springing to



‘What! the lost ransom?’ I exclaimed, springing to my feet
and staring wildly about me,

my feet and staring wildly about me. ‘*Where—where is it?*’

‘Not far off,’ replied Mac coolly; ‘in fact,’ he added, with the same provoking deliberation, ‘*you’re standing upon it!*’

I was down on my hands and knees in a moment, poking about and examining the supposed treasure. It was perfectly true. The heap was a mass of gold! Below a thin coating of dust and scorix was gold in every conceivable shape—bars, plates, ingots, shields, friezes, vessels, and ornaments, all jumbled together in the utmost disorder. Yet this wondrous collection was not without one point of uniformity—every article was of purest gold, and the whole mass was bedded in grains or dust of the same precious metal, which, judging from the numerous shreds of half-rotten leather, had escaped from the bags that originally held it.

The whole condition of the heap, in fact, attested the truth of my comrade’s assertion, astounding as it was, that here actually was the famous treasure—the strippings of the Temple of the Sun at Cuzco—lying just as it had been dumped into the crater three hundred years ago. Yes, there could be no mistake about it; the fascinating story which had lured us to our doom was no myth after all, for here at last were the evidences of its truth. No wonder the treasure had remained so long undiscovered though hundreds of eager searchers had risked their lives in the quest; and here it might have lain for ever hidden from mortal ken but for the accident of our pursuit forcing us to take refuge in the subterranean channel.

‘Well, what do you think of it?’ inquired Mac as

I ceased delving and sat upon my heels, feeling dazed and bewildered at the result of my investigations.

‘Think!’ I said, rubbing my eyes to make sure I was not dreaming. ‘Why, that we’re the most unlucky wretches in existence. We’ve found the treasure, but it’s of no more use to us than so much dross.’

‘No,’ responded Mac. ‘There seems to be some curse about this Inca gold. How persistently it mocks us! Here is enough of it to found an empire, and yet it cannot help us even out of this dismal pit!’

It was so; and no wonder that, sick at heart and weary in mind and body, we sank despairingly upon the worthless pelf. What a miserable end it seemed to all our high hopes and strenuous efforts, to perish at the very goal we had set ourselves to reach! What irony of fate!

These bitter reflections insensibly merged into the confused thoughts of dreamland as, aided by the monotonous sound of falling water, sleep gradually overcame us, and we knew no more. How long this merciful oblivion lasted it would be impossible to say, but at last I was awakened by being roughly shaken and shouted at. There was also a tremendous roaring of water and pealing of thunder, while flashes of electricity kept the volcano in an almost continuous blaze of light. I sprang to my feet, and for several seconds stood bewildered and petrified by fear. The storm had returned with redoubled fury, and already the inpouring flood lapped our feet.

‘It’s all up with us now,’ exclaimed Mac, ‘unless we can swim about until the water rises to the inflow.’

‘Swim?’ I cried—‘swim in this seething whirlpool? Impossible!’

‘Then good-bye, old chap!’ was my comrade’s solemn response as he gripped my hand.

So rapidly was the water rising that already it was up to my waist as I returned the hand-shake; and the last ‘Good-bye’ was on my lips when something prodded me sharply in the back, almost knocking me off my feet.

It was pitch-dark, but as I recovered my equilibrium and glanced around a flash of light revealed the object which had knocked against me. It was the skeleton on its driftwood raft!

‘Good heavens!’ I almost shrieked with horror, for the grinning skull looked more ghastly than ever in the brilliant light.

Mac saw it too; but, to my surprise, he was very differently affected by the sight.

‘Catch hold!’ he cried, seizing the nearest log with one hand, and pitching overboard the skeleton with the other—‘catch hold! We may yet be saved!’

I made a dash for the drifting timber; but, alas! I was a moment too late. The whirling flood lifted me off my feet, the flash disappeared in inky darkness, and I missed my aim.

With a cry of despair, I turned upon my back and was borne swiftly along by the vortex.

‘Where are you?’ shouted Mac in stentorian but agonised tones.

His voice sounded unexpectedly near, and I lost no time in answering him. But neither of us could make out anything in the Stygian gloom. Oh for another flash! It came at last, and my comrade saw

me. He had pulled himself on to the logs, and was lying across them, the better to hold them together. Fortunately their weight, with his added, created more resistance to the current than did I, so that I had overtaken and was passing them. The timely flash saved me. Mac stretched out his arm, and catching me by the collar, pulled me on to the raft beside him. We clung to the logs for dear life, and in a few minutes, though they seemed more like hours, we were raised on the flood to the level of the orifice. Still the water continued to rise until almost to the top of the opening, when suddenly it began to flow back again by the way it had come, the torrent having found another outlet.

‘Look out!’ cried Mac as the return flow carried our rude craft towards the dull glimmer of light that but a few minutes before we had despaired of ever reaching. ‘Lie close!’ he added, flattening himself against the logs to avoid being crushed between them and the rock-arch.

I followed my comrade’s example, and the next minute we shot through the tunnel-like orifice into the warring elements without. There was just light enough for us to see that on our right hand was a steepish slope, while on the left a narrow ledge of rock alone formed the side of the water-course. Below was a sheer precipice, down which a little farther on, to judge by the noise, the torrent leapt.

‘This side—jump for your life!’ cried Mac as, suiting the action to the word, he sprang upon the slope to our right.

I followed an instant later, and barely reached the bank; for, owing to the swirl of the water, the logs

flew asunder the moment we rose from our prostrate position.

'Thank Heaven we're out of that!' exclaimed Mac gratefully.

'Amen!' was my equally fervent response.

We had no strength for more; and not daring to move in the tempest and darkness, we lay huddled together under some adjacent rocks until morning. Fortunately the day was bright and hot after the awful storm of the previous night, and our chilled bodies and stiffened limbs gradually reviving under the powerful influence of the tropical sun, we managed to clamber slowly up the mountain.

When at length we reached the summit the first thing that met our eyes was the figure of a horseman just topping the ridge on the opposite side of the crater. He was quickly followed by four others. In that clear air it was easy to recognise our comrade Stavely, and he seemed to see us at the same moment, judging by the excited way in which he began waving his cap. We tried to raise a cheer, but it was a miserable failure, and we only had sufficient strength remaining to sit down and wait until our rescuers could reach us.

It did not take Dick very long, with his medical skill and the restoratives he brought with him in the shape of coca-infusion and fresh venison-tea, to restore us to comparative health and strength once more; after which he told us how he had arrived safely at the islet, and found Pedro and Chuco, with the two Incalans, still there. He said he thought they would have remained awaiting our return till the end of their days if necessary, so literally had the faithful

fellows construed their orders. Fortunately some of the loose horses, after our first disastrous encounter with the Guambos, had strayed into the valley, and these coming in useful for mounts, Dick had been able to return quickly to our rescue. They also enabled us on the following day to carry away some twenty thousand pounds worth of the gold-dust from the gully below; for the Guambos, thinking we were drowned, had cleared off, and thus unexpectedly we obtained the needful capital for our new enterprise.

There is not much to add. We found our launch just as we had left it, and with our stronger crew and the aid of the current, we experienced comparatively little difficulty in descending the Pachitea, the Tapuyas we encountered being either outdistanced or put to flight. On reaching the Ucayali, we took leave of Chuco and his two fellow-countrymen, not forgetting to send handsome presents by them to our good friends Huanco and Marona—an excellent field-glass for the former, and a revolver and a case of ammunition for the latter.

As for the faithful Pedro, he has elected to remain in our service and follow our fortunes to the end.

To Unini we sent a beautiful little clock which chimed the hours and half-hours, together with our photographs and a neat little note in Spanish. The latter conveyed our regrets at parting from one who had been so kind and gracious to us, and the assurance that it would be our chief aim to return to the Ceja de la Montaña so soon as ever we could perfect our scheme of colonisation; adding that, with this end in view, we purposed visiting the seat of govern-

ment at Lima to endeavour to obtain the necessary concession.

Of course Mac indited the letter, being the only one who understood Spanish well enough ; and I was annoyed to find that he had added a postscript of his own, the purport of which he obstinately refused to divulge, though the last words struck me as having rather a suspicious ring about them. They were, '*Pero, el hombre propone y Dios dispone, muy amáda Unini;*' which, however, as I afterwards learnt, meant only, 'But man proposes, God disposes, beloved Unini.'

THE END.

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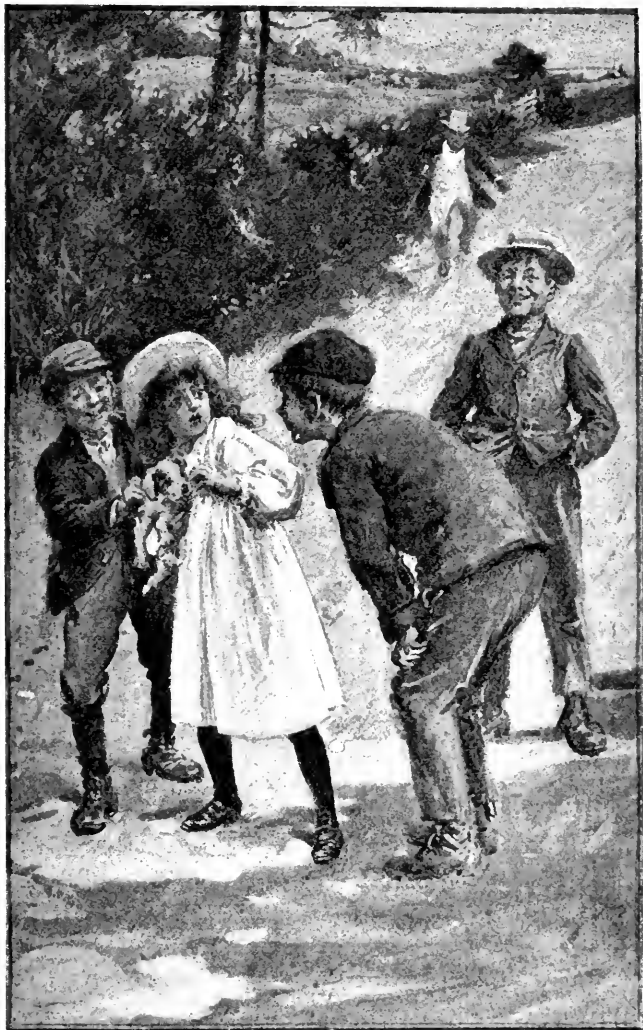
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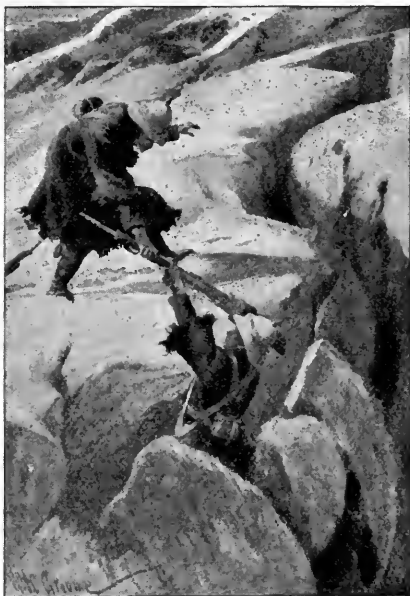
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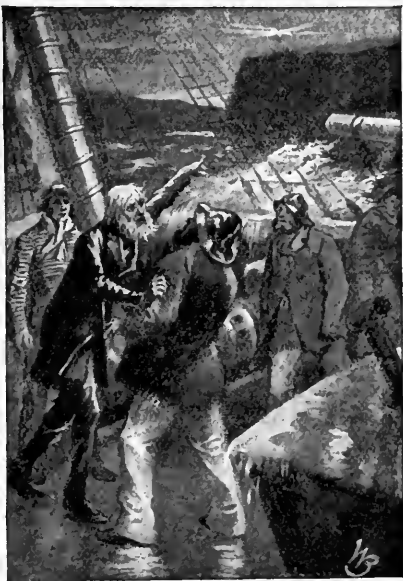
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